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Steeple Bumpstead

A WEAVER OF WEBS

WI

48.

BY

JOHN OXENHAM

Warp and Woof and Tangle—
Weavers of Webs are we.
Living and dying—and mightier dead—
For the shuttle once sped is sped—is sped—
Weavers of Webs are we.

White, and black, and hodden-gray—
Weavers of Webs are we.
To every weaver one golden strand
Is given in trust by the Master Hand—
Weavers of Webs are we.

And that we weave, we know not—
Weavers of Webs are we.
The threads we see, but the pattern is known
To the Master Weaver alone, alone—
Weavers of Webs are we.

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TO MY FRIEND

WILLIAM HILL

IN TOKEN OF HIGH ESTEEM

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A WEAVER OF WEBS

CHAPTER I

HER GRACE OF MALPLAQUET

IT all began at the Nicaraguan Ambassador's garden-party.

If Don Stefan had not given that garden-party the chances are that Basil Reigne would not have been at it, and might never have met the Princess Marie, which would have been very regrettable, not only on Basil's account, but for several other very good reasons; not the least, that this brief record of the strange events which followed that meeting would never have come to be written.

As every one knows, the residence of the Nicaraguan Ambassador in Vienna is the smallest and least imposing of all the embassies, but by way of compensation it is surrounded by gardens of unusual extent and beauty—wherefore the Nicaraguan Ambassador gave garden-parties instead of balls. And as he had made a congenial study of the subject, and had had ample opportunity during his long tenure of office of perfecting his ideas, his garden-parties had become a feature in the brilliant social life of the gay city, and the attendance was always very large and of the very highest *ton*.

The most *blasé* frequenter of balls and garden-parties could find no flaw in Don Stefan's arrangements. The Dowager Duchess of Malplaquet, indeed, made a point of falling foul of His Excellency over

some trifling detail on each and every occasion. Just as on this particular occasion she blandly informed him that the waffelen he supplied with his ice-creams were distinctly inferior to those obtainable from Baillière's, in Paris, and strongly recommended him to try them next time. And His Excellency smilingly replied, with a courtly bow, that the waffelen which Madame the Duchesse had condescended to honour with her notice had arrived that very morning direct from Baillière's, in Paris. Upon which the Duchess gravely told the Ambassador that it pained her to say it, but candidly, and as one brought up in the sure and certain hope of a future life, she did not believe him, and that an unmarried man of his age could not be expected to discriminate to a nicety in such matters, and that if there had been a Madame the Ambassadress things would have been very different indeed.

And to this the Ambassador replied, as he had many times previously replied, and as though it had never struck him in that light before—

'*Ma foi*, Madame, but it is true! It is an idea worth considering. May I do myself the honour of calling upon you to-morrow?'

In reply to which the sharp-tongued old lady would murmur in her most dulcet tones—

'But certainly, Don Stefan! I shall be at home to you all day until six o'clock, when 'Toinette will begin to dress my hair for the ball at the palace'—or wherever else it might be. For there was never a night but she was out enjoying herself, and watching and criticizing, shrewdly and caustically, the carryings-on of the third and fourth generations, with whose forbears she had carried on in much the same fashion decades before.

After which interchange of civilities Don Stefan would bend over the still plump, well-shaped, white hand in its black silk mitten, and impress a courtly

kiss upon it, and bow himself away to mingle with his other guests, leaving the Duchess placidly happy in the consciousness of duty well and truly done.

They were very old, friendly enemies these two. People said, indeed—but there—Don Stefan was seventy-five and the Duchess had cheerfully acknowledged to seventy for many years past.

Since the hypercritical old lady could find no weaker point in Don Stefan's social economy than an alleged falling-off in the quality of his waffelen, it may be taken for granted that his garden-parties were on the whole extremely well managed.

As Second Attaché to the British Embassy, Basil Reigne attended the Ambassador's garden-party, and all the various embassy balls and other social functions, as was the bounden duty of a dutiful Second Attaché only six months attached, and desirous of acquainting himself thoroughly with all the details of his new post, and with all the shades of opinion and modes of thought current among the people with whom his lot was cast.

He had hosts of friends and was welcomed everywhere, for his father had represented his country at almost every court in Europe, and Basil himself was now in his fifth year in the service, and was as fine a specimen of high-bred Young England as you might come across in many a long day's march.

It was a blazing hot day, and the gardens gleamed and glowed and changed colour like a great kaleidoscope, with all the tints of the rainbow and with some which would have put any self-respecting rainbow to the blush.

Basil wandered slowly along through the gay, chattering crowd, but he greeted his friends and acquaintances with an unusually preoccupied air. His mind was, in fact, too full of an important piece of business to permit his proper enjoyment of the brilliant function.

For that very morning the Chief had sent for him, and had entrusted him with a commission involving great interests, and all the possibilities, unless the matter was most diplomatically handled, of stirring up troublesome international complications, and this the Minister was most anxiously desirous of avoiding just at that time.

Of such moment was the affair, that Basil, though no shirker and not by any means wanting in confidence in himself, had ventured to suggest that his senior, Viscount Battlemont, might possibly feel aggrieved at being passed over in the matter.

To which the Chief replied in terse and undiplomatic language, ' Battlemont 's an ass. He ought to be in the Church or the Army. Why in Heaven's name they pitchfork such fellows into the diplomatic service I cannot imagine. No, Basil, my boy ! there is no one for it but you, and I shall only feel easy in my mind if it is in your hands. You know the interests involved. Carry the matter through successfully and it will be a feather in your cap which will not be lost sight of. Find out all you can about that fellow on the other side, and when the papers arrive get off as soon as you learn where he is. From all accounts he is a difficult bird to catch and a slippery one when you 've caught him.'

As this was the first affair of importance which had been entrusted to him since he came to Vienna, Basil was determined to justify the Chief's confidence in him. And so he came to the garden-party with his head full of the matter, and with a look of most ingenuously undiplomatic concentration on his face.

He was picking his way thoughtfully through the crowd towards the remotest, quietest, and prettiest spot in the whole gardens—that little level of velvet turf, hedged all round by thick rhododendrons, which runs down to the pool where the big white water-lilies grow—when his devious course was suddenly

arrested by the gentle utterance of his name, and he found himself towering over Her Grace of Malplaquet, who was reclining in a garden chair.

'Basil, my child, I want to speak to you. Sit down here.'

'Ah, Duchess!' he said, dropping into a chair by her side; 'I almost tumbled over you. What a crush, isn't it? I hope I didn't tread on your toes?'

'You didn't hear me scream, did you?'

'No,' he said, somewhat startled. The idea of the Duchess of Malplaquet screaming was so utterly incongruous and preposterous. It would not have been one whit more surprising to hear that His Majesty the Emperor had sat on his throne and whistled during the opening of the Reichsrath. No one had ever heard Her Grace raise her voice above a fluty whisper, but in that fluty whisper she cooed the most biting sarcasms, and occasionally, when it suited her purpose, told the most terrible scandals, and, gentle as her utterances were, they rang through the social phalanxes of half the capitals of Europe.

'Well, my dear, if you didn't hear me scream you didn't tread on my toes. I don't scream often, but I invariably make a point of doing so when people tread on my toes. And I never forgive them. Not for having trodden on my toes, mind you, but for having made me scream. They may rifle my reputation and load me with legendary iniquities, but tread on my toes and be forgiven—never! And now, my boy, tell me quick. Is it peace or war?—and when?—and is it Bear and Lion, or the Eagles again? The latter, I hope, for your sakes, for you have grown fat and lazy and out of condition over there across the water.'

'Dear, dear! What a very spiteful and bloodthirsty old lady it is!' said Basil, laughing.

'Not at all. Simply the very natural desire to see how matters will finally adjust themselves before I

have to go. The game has been so extremely interesting, and I would so dearly like to see the end of it.'

'But why this sudden inquisition, Duchess?'

'Your face, my boy. It is full of wars and rumours of wars. Nothing less than a great national disaster could justify such a face, and even then it would be most undiplomatic. Why, Benedetti's face at Ems wasn't a patch on it. And that reminds me, that was the only time in my life that I had my toes trodden on *without* screaming. The dear old Wilhelm lamed me for a fortnight, but he kept the Frenchman and the whole of Europe waiting while he apologized for his inadvertence. Yes, my dear, for two whole minutes the peace of Europe and the future of France were suspended upon my toes.'

'Well, that is something to boast of,' said Basil, laughing. 'Many a woman's face has made history, but I never heard of her toes intervening before. But I 'm afraid my face told you more than there is to tell, Duchess. I am really sorry to disappoint you.'

'That is as I expected, my friend, and that is just what I wanted to speak to you about. I shall have to give your father's son lessons in diplomacy, just as I gave them to your father himself. *Ay-di-mi!* how many years ago!'

'Not so very many, Duchess.'

'Ah, that is better! I shall make you a diplomat yet. Learn the value of silence, my child, and when you do speak never say what you think. Let your face express just the opposite of what you feel, and learn to lie with every appearance of truth. That is the a-b-c of diplomacy——'

'At the Palace to-night, Monsieur le Baron, if you wish,' she said to the Russian Ambassador, who had strolled up and stood bowing in front of her. 'I am busy just now instructing my young friend here in the gentle art of lying.'

'Monsieur Reigne will, I am sure, profit by your Grace's——'

'Now, now!' she said, shaking a flashing finger at him, 'keep your barbarous compliments for those who are thin-skinned enough to feel hurt by them. By the way, Monsieur le Baron, are you staying long this afternoon? The great heat is not good for any one with a tendency to apoplexy. I am expecting Adela shortly. You would very greatly oblige me if you could make it convenient to leave before she comes. The sight of you will spoil all her enjoyment.'

The Russian bowed with raised eyebrows and a grim smile, and withdrew.

'A perfect devil of a man!' cooed the Duchess. 'Socially and politically, and in every other aspect, I detest him. The incarnation of irresponsible autocracy, employing any and every means to its end. If he dared he would clap my dear Adela back into her fortress. Bah! I hate him. We are civilized here, at any rate. Why has he never been shot, I wonder!—F-f-f!' and she blew away the recollection of the Russian and turned to Reigne again.

'And how does the dear old man wear, Basil, *mon gars*? Has he quite got over the loss of those three dear lads? It was very, very terrible, coming all one on top of the other.'

'Yes, it was very terrible. It nearly broke him up. I verily believe he only pulled through by venting his feelings on the Foreign Office and kicking it harder than ever. But is it possible I have not seen you since that time, Duchess?'

'I do not visit St. Petersburg,' said the old lady simply. 'Why don't they make him Foreign Minister himself?'

'Bless your Grace! He refused it again last year, told them to come back in twenty years when he had carried out some of the reforms in the F.O., which he

said he could do better from the outside than from the inside.'

'Just like him,' murmured the Duchess. 'Yes, charming day, Monsieur Desrolles. Adela is very well, thank you. She sings at the Palace to-night, so she is resting now. No, I don't expect she will be here,'—and then turning to Reigne again,—'I mourned for those boys as if they had been of my own thirteen. I nursed every one of you in my arms except yourself.'

'And now you are nursing me.'

'You had the bad taste to be born in St. Petersburg, and I never saw your dear mother again. The sweetest woman I ever met, my dear. Women as a rule do not satisfy me. I know too much about them, you see. They either flatter me, or fear me, or both together. Your mother was the most perfectly natural woman I ever met, and as brave and sweet as God ever made. I have only met one woman since who satisfies me in the same way that she did.'

'Madame Melita?'

'No. Adela is good and sweet, and considering all she has gone through, she is very wonderful, but I was not thinking of her. The dear girl I mean is quite young, the loveliest creature in the world, and absolutely as good as she is charming, which is quite an unusual thing in women nowadays. It does my old heart good simply to sit and watch her. Those wonderful eyes of hers look out on this wicked world as calmly and hopefully as though the wisdom of all the ages lay behind them, or as though the world were just new created and our poor little Eve had never met that wicked old Serpent. Wonderful! Wonderful!' cooed the gentle voice musingly. 'I wonder how long she will keep that look in her eyes. The most restful look, my dear, that ever I met. It is like looking down on a quiet shaded pool on a hot

summer day. And yet if I mistake not she is in danger——'

'Ah, *tiens!* Pardon, your Majesty!' and she attempted to rise, and was quietly reseated in her chair, while a kind, grave, and unutterably sad face bent over her in friendly greeting.

It was Franz Josef himself, and Basil rose hastily and bowed himself away.

CHAPTER II

A SECOND-HAND LESSON IN DIPLOMACY

HE reached his oasis, whose quiet was as yet undisturbed by the wandering crowd, and lighting a cigar, sat down on the seat nearest the water. Resting his elbows on his knees, and gazing down on the dark pool, spangled all over with white and golden blossoms, he endeavoured to concentrate his thoughts on the matter he had in hand. He found it difficult, however, to keep them from wandering off to the Duchess of Malplaquet's paragon. He wondered who she was. She must certainly be very good and very charming to have won so high a place in Her Grace's good graces. And he did not even know her name. If the Emperor had waited just two minutes longer he would have known all about it. Hang the Emperor!—well, no, perhaps not that; he was a fine old fellow, and had come pluckily through the hardest of hard luck.

He had only got so far in the consideration of his diplomatic problem when Delsarti, of the Italian Embassy, sauntered into the enclosure, and nodding to him, dropped into the seat by his side.

'What 's amiss, old man?' asked Basil; 'you don't look up to par.'

'No,' said the Italian, with a discontented shrug,

as he slowly lighted a cigarette, 'I find it very hot and not very interesting.'

'So!—the Melita not here?'

'No, she sings at the Palace to-night, so at present she is resting.'

'If I were you, *mon ami*, I would stick close to Desrolles. If Madame Adela puts in an appearance, Desrolles won't be far away.'

'Monsieur Desrolles makes me hot. He is jumping about the whole time as if he had St. Vitus's dance. He is never still two minutes together.'

Basil was tempted to get rid of him by dropping a hint that Madame Melita might be expected shortly, when Delsarti growled—

'Talk of the devil! Here comes the little one himself. We were just speaking of you, my friend,' as the vivacious little first secretary of the French Embassy appeared through the rhododendrons.

'Fascinating subject!' said Desrolles, dropping down on to the turf and mopping his face, 'and deserving of more appreciative treatment than it is likely to receive at your hands, my dear Delsarti. You both seem to have got a pretty considerable hump on you, as the American Minister would say—Phew!'—fanning himself with his handkerchief—'Isn't it delightful!—quite a foretaste of the distant hereafter. Knew if I found Reigne I should strike a cool spot. Been running all over the place after him. Have you been introduced to the bright particular star—the fairest flower of this gay parterre—the richest and most beautiful of women—the milli—milli—mill—millionairess—in a word, the Obdanovitch?'

'Dear, dear! What a combination!' said Reigne. 'Agéd, I presume, or Monsieur Desrolles would not be wasting his sweetness on his mere fellow-men?'

'Agéd, dear boy?—Nineteen, maybe!—beautiful as a houri!—good as an angel!—so they say; I do

not consider myself qualified to give an opinion. Lips, twin cherries !—eyes !—well, if you won't laugh, I 'll tell you—they make me wish I was a good little boy again so that I could go up and kiss her.'

'And Desrolles here ! ' said Reigne again, with a quiet laugh.

' Ah, dear boy ! We are made for one another, I and the Obdanovitch. I know it ! I feel it ! She would in many respects perfectly supplement my nature. She would supply an aching void in my—er——'

' Treasury ! ' suggested Delsarti.

' Delsarti, my friend,' said the Frenchman, regarding him impressively, ' your brain is getting too active. It is a bad sign. I fear sunstroke for you. Would you oblige me by putting on your hat after inserting in it the leaf of a water-lily ? Cabbage-leaf would be more appropriate and correct, but Don Stefan does not seem to attain to cabbage. And, for love of Heaven, if you have not smoked all your cigarettes lend me one. I will repay you some day, if not in this world, then in the next. If I am not permitted to bring you cigarettes I will, at all events, endeavour to bring you drops of water for your parchéd tongue.'

' Thank Heaven, he 's quiet at last ! ' said Reigne, as the rattlebrain lighted a cigarette, and lay flat on his back puffing the smoke towards the sky. ' Desrolles, my boy, you talk too much. Let me give you, as a budding diplomatist, the benefit of my hard-earned experience.—Learn the value of silence. When you do speak never say what you think. Let your face express just the opposite of what you feel, and learn to lie with every appearance of truth. In some of these matters I know you are fairly proficient. The perfect combination makes the perfect diplomatist. If you will take my advice you will retire to some quiet spot at least once every day, and

count up to—say sixty—while you think out your future plans, and give your tongue a much-needed rest.'

'Great Gamaliel! were I not too lazy I would come and sit at your feet. Suggest it to Delsarti. He wastes all his time frivolling round the Melita at present.'

'And you, my little one?' growled Delsarti.

'Ah, it is different. She likes my company. She says I amuse her.'

'Ah!' said the Italian, with another depreciatory shrug. 'There is no accounting for tastes.'

'We still have not learned why the lady of many qualifications——' began Reigne by way of diversion.

'Ah!' said Desrolles, jumping to his feet and casting up his eyes, with his hand on his heart—'the glorious Obdanovitch! Dear boys, I will tell you. It may save you pain hereafter. The Obdanovitch and her millions are destined for neither Frenchman, nor Italian, nor yet for Englishman, but just simply for another rascally Szarvas.'

'Ah, *tiens!* The Melita!' he exclaimed, as he caught sight of a distant face and figure through the tops of the rhododendrons, and rushed away in their direction.

Delsarti rose instantly to follow, and Reigne stood up laughingly to watch the chase. But before the Italian could slip away, the Englishman had gripped his arm and was asking eagerly, 'Say, Delsarti, who is the lady in grey over there by the conservatory—the nearer one of the two?'

'I do not know, my friend,' said the other, wriggling impatiently; 'I know almost no one yet. Here is Count Szarvas. We will ask him. He is sure to know.'

Count Alexander Szarvas and Baron Juthenheim, the Russian Ambassador, were just turning into the enclosure, and raising his hat, Delsarti addressed

himself to the Count, courtesy and impatience struggling for the upper hand.

'Pardon me, Count, you know everything and everybody, can you tell us who the lady in grey is—over there by the conservatory?'

The Count's upturned brown moustaches showed a gleam of white teeth for a moment, as he looked in the direction indicated and smilingly answered, 'Yes, my dear Delsarti, that is my wife's sister, the Princess Marie Obdanovitch. Is it possible you have not been introduced to her? Why, you must certainly be the only man in the gardens who has not held converse with Marie this afternoon. Ah, there is Anna now with the Turkish Ambassador. They are coming this way. Instinct evidently guides the Princess towards one more world to conquer.'

Delsarti was on pins and needles. 'Pardon me, Count, it is Monsieur Reigne here who is dying for an introduction. I must find Desrolles, or he will be getting into mischief. *Au revoir*, Messieurs,' and he sped away.

'Ah!' said Szarvas, with another gleaming smile, 'the Melita has arrived, I see, and where the Melita is, Desrolles and Delsarti are never far away. They are very amusing those two.'

CHAPTER III

COUNT ALEXANDER SZARVAS

REIGNE had met Count Alexander Szarvas constantly in society, but had not yet succeeded in placing him quite to his own satisfaction. His tall, well-knit figure betokened a military training. He had, in fact, been through the disastrous campaign of Sadowa. His light, up-curling moustache and forked beard gave him the look of a Prussian

cavalry officer, and imparted to his face an air of perpetual good humour which at times his eyes somewhat belied. They were dark and keen, with quick all-round glances, which reminded Basil of a hunter he once possessed, and which he had to have shot after it had twice nearly been the death of him through its untrustworthiness. Without, as he said to himself, any valid reason for it, he felt for the Count that slight indefinable antipathy which at times springs up in one's mind towards a stranger—which, indeed, popular opinion alleges to be the universal British feeling towards all strangers—and which further acquaintance frequently removes, and not seldom transforms into sound friendship.

Count Szarvas was always most suave and courteous. He made a point of it. Perhaps it was this imperturbable suavity that palled upon the Englishman. It is not one of the essential English graces.

The Count had quitted the army, and now occupied himself in various undertakings which kept him travelling from one end of Europe to the other, keeping all his irons hot. The results were apparently satisfactory. He maintained a considerable establishment, entertained largely, went everywhere, and was on the best of terms with himself and the rest of the world. Basil, however, had not yet broken through his insular nimbus of suspicious reserve in his intercourse with him. He had never felt more like doing so than at this moment when the ladies turned into the path that cleft the rhododendrons and entered the enclosure.

'Anna,' said the Count to his wife, 'you have met Mr. Reigne. Marie, permit me to introduce to you the Hon. Basil Reigne, of the British Embassy.'

And Basil Reigne bowed before the most beautiful girl he had ever yet seen—and he had seen many.

'What wonderful, wonderful eyes,' he said to himself, 'and what an incomparably sweet face.'

Great dark eyes they were, looking out calm and straight from level brows that daintily pencilled her fair broad forehead, and the light of a very lovely nature shone through them and illumined all upon whom it dwelt. And men who were strong and clean rejoiced in the friendliness of that pure outshining of a pure soul; and burdened men felt their burdens lighten before her; and men who were neither clean nor strong strove in her presence to appear stronger and better than they were. You who remember Marie Obdanovitch at the age of twenty know it.

And when Basil raised his eyes again, for her beauty had intoxicated him, he found the dark eyes laughing up into his own.

'Will you excuse me laughing just a little, Mr. Reigne?' said the Princess, dropping gracefully into the seat.

'I will even beg you to continue, Princess. If I can add to your enjoyment, pray command me.'

'You are already doing so, Mr. Reigne.'

'Now, Marie, behave!' said the Countess. 'Let me explain, Mr. Reigne. Your fussy little friend, Monsieur Desrolles, was running about everywhere fanning himself with his hat and inquiring for you—"Where is my friend Reigne?—Any one seen Monsieur Reigne? I am dying of heat. If I can find Reigne I shall find the only cool spot in the gardens," and so on, and Marie, I presume, is enjoying Monsieur Desrolles' appreciation of your sagacity.'

'England is delighted to contribute for once to the gaiety of Russia?' he said, bowing to the laughing eyes.

'Poland, if you please, Mr. Reigne!' she said quickly. 'I hate Russia as much as I dare, and of all Russians I detest most the Russian Ambassador, who is just behind us and is listening to every word we say. He is the cruellest and wickedest old man I

know. He will be shot some day. Sometimes I feel as if I could do it myself.'

'Marie, Marie! your tongue runs away with you,' said the Countess, and the Baron, with a shrug and a smile, leaned over the back of the seat to speak to her.

The Princess jabbed the point of her sunshade viciously into the turf, as though it were the body and soul of Baron Juthenheim, and then looked up smilingly at Reigne again.

'Do you know that we have met before, Mr. Reigne?'

'Surely not, Princess! I could not possibly have forgotten it.'

There was homage in the exceeding earnestness of his tone.

'You were at Monte Carlo last spring?' she said.

'I was.'

'I was stopping with some friends in Nice, and they would go over to the pigeon-shooting, though I hate it. You won me a dozen pairs of gloves. I knew nothing of your powers, but I backed the Englishman because his opponent was a Russian, and I won. I recognized you the moment I saw you.'

'My only regret is that the recognition could not be mutual.'

'Ah, well, that won't happen again,' she said merrily. 'I think you will know me the next time we meet,' and Reigne dropped his ardent gaze for a moment. 'You are a great sportsman, I presume, Mr. Reigne, in spite of the character Monsieur Desrolles gives you of a surprising faculty for keeping cool.'

'"Sportsman" is somewhat of an equivocal term nowadays, Princess. Being an Englishman——'

'You are never so happy as when killing something——' she laughed up at him.

'Well, not quite so bad as that. I was going to say that being an Englishman I have been brought up on outdoor sports, and shooting and hunting are

certainly among the good things of this world. A spice of danger always adds to one's enjoyment. Don't you think so?'

'Surely! but where does the spice of danger come in in your shooting in England.'

'Oh, well, as to that it depends on whom you are out with, you know. I have seen the most innocent battue develop the most murderous tendencies.'

'Battue-shooting!' and the dainty lips curled downwards at the corners. 'You don't dignify a battue with the title "sport" surely, Mr. Reigne. I know you are a good shot, but I should hardly have expected that battue-shooting filled your ideas of sport. You should come down to Vilova and see what we call sport. And why shouldn't you? We go there for the shooting early next month. Why should you not join us? I am sure you would enjoy it.'

'That would be very delightful. I am quite sure I should enjoy it immensely.'

'Alex,' she said, poking the Count in the back with the sunshade, 'you are to invite Mr. Reigne to join us at Vilova. He is dying to kill something. I want to show him what we call sport in this country.'

For an imperceptible fraction of a second Count Alex hesitated. Then, with every show of heartiness, he said, 'We shall be delighted if you will join us, Mr. Reigne, and we will give you the very best sport the country can offer. Adela Melita and the Duchess are coming, and of course Desrolles and Delsarti, and most likely Baron Juthenheim——'

'*Tcha!*' said the Princess, and the turf suffered vicarious punishment at the point of her sunshade once more.

'But, Alex,' she said in a low tone of annoyance, "that is a stupidity! You know perfectly well that——'

The Count shrugged good-humouredly.

'Then we will expect you, Mr. Reigne. Any day after the tenth. Wire me what train you will come by and I will send the dog-cart to meet you at Zarnova.'

'A thousand thanks, Count! Subject to the exigencies of business, pray count me of your party.'

Count Alex turned to the Russian and the Turk, who were deep in conversation, and Basil bent towards the Countess, and asked—

'I am sure you will pardon my ignorance, Countess, but where is Vilova, and where is Zarnova?'

'Vilova lies between the Balkans and the Rhodopes. You train to Zarnova, then ride or drive to the Château, which stands just outside Vilova.'

'And what kind of sport do you get there, Princess?' he asked, hungry for another look into those wonderful eyes. 'What was your biggest bag last year?'

'Let me see,' she said, 'I got two wolves and a big boar all in one day. I think that was the best day I had. That'—showing him a couple of gold-mounted tusks forming the handle of her sunshade—'is a bit of the boar.'

'That sounds like sport indeed. And is the game round Vilova generally on as large a scale as that?'

'Oh, there are the usual things, you know—snipe, and small deer, and so on—but they do not interest me. I shoot from a love of sport, not from a simple love of killing. And then there is always the off-chance of a shot at a bear or a brigand. It is one of the dreams of my youth to shoot a bear all by myself. As for the brigands, one hears plenty about them, but they keep themselves invisible.'

'Brigands!' said Reigne. 'Really! This gets better and better. Do you mean the real genuine

article—big moustache, wild eyes, red sash, pistols, daggers, and all that kind of thing ? '

' Yes, I suppose that is about the correct description, but I have never set eyes on one of them. I am simply dying to make the acquaintance of the great Constantine. My firm belief is that Alex pays them blackmail to leave the Château alone.'

' You foolish girl,' said the Countess, ' you don't know what you are talking about. I am only too grateful to them for keeping away.'

' And who is the fortunate bearer of the great name whose acquaintance you are so desirous of making ? ' asked Reigne of the Princess.

' Constantine ? He is the chief of all the brigands of the Rhodopes. He is said to be extremely handsome, and he is certainly very clever. When he is not being chased by Bulgarian troops he is being chased by Turkish troops, and he spends the intervals in carrying off fat tax-gatherers, and rich grandees, and any one and every one out of whom he can squeeze ransom.'

' And so far he has not favoured you ? '

' No, isn't it too bad ? Why should we be left out in the cold and treated with contempt ? '

' Perhaps we shall have better luck this time.'

' What is all this ? ' asked the Count, strolling up with the others. ' Is Marie trying to frighten you with the bogeys of the Rhodopes, Mr. Reigne ? '

' Frighten me, Count ? The Princess is piling up the attractions in a way that is perfectly irresistible.'

' Did I hear this child say she desired to meet Constantine the Great ? ' said the Russian, beaming down on her with his big, protruding, crab-like eyes.

' My good uncle,' said the Princess, with child-like frankness, ' you generally hear what you are not intended to hear. Some time you will hear more than is good for you.'

'Ha, ha!' he laughed wheezily, 'when that fatal shot is fired, eh, *ma belle*? Till then I hear all I can. But it was curious—as the Princess's silvery tones sounded Constantine in my left ear the Pasha's dulcet voice named Constantine in my right ear, and as I gathered, both were expressing an ardent desire to see the gentleman. Could you not include a meeting in your programme at Vilova, Count?'

'Constantine might object,' said the Count, smiling.

'What! to meet the most charming Princess in——'

The Princess inadvertently stabbed him on the foot with her sunshade, and he swallowed an oath and smiled a purple smile.

'What has Constantine been up to now, your Excellency?' asked the Count of the Turkish Ambassador.

'Oh, just the usual thing. Tax-gatherer at Tareka and £5000. Tax-gatherer of no importance —£5000 serious matter. Government, touched in its tenderest quarter, determined to put an end to brigandage in general and Constantine in particular. Suggest concerted action on part of Bulgarian and Turkish troops.'

'And when is the co-operative scheme to be put into operation, Pasha? Is Constantine likely to be snuffed out before the Princess has the chance of making his acquaintance?' asked the Count.

'It is in course of arrangement, and we may expect results shortly.'

'In the "sweet by-and-by," as the American Minister says. Well, we will live in hope, and meanwhile Constantine will no doubt continue to enjoy himself much as usual.'

'Ah,' said the Countess, rising suddenly, 'here come the Duchess and Adela,' and she went to meet them with outstretched hands.

CHAPTER IV

HER GRACE'S LITTLE WAY

REMEMBERING the Duchess's very pointed hint to the Baron, Reigne watched the scene with interest.

The gentlemen raised their hats, and the Pasha touched his fez, as the ladies drew near to the seat. The Duchess, leaning on Adela Melita's arm, bowed courteously all round, till her keen eyes fell on the Russian, then she drew herself up with an expression which, in a man, would have meant, 'Well, I 'll be hanged! You here?' She said nothing, however, till she had kissed the Princess on both cheeks and seated herself beside her, Adela Melita and the Countess standing apart and chatting in the intimacy of close friendship. Then the old lady loosed her tongue.

'Szarvas!' she cried, and the flutiness had gone out of her whisper, and it cleft the air like the whistle of an arrow. 'Did I ever tell you that story of Olga Petroff and the Grand Duke Peter?'

'I don't think you ever did, Duchess. Is it a good story?'

'It is one of my very best, and it is almost unknown, though it made a terrible scandal at the time.'

So the Count turned to face the music. He knew enough of the story to understand the situation, but, when the choice fell between discourtesy to Baron Juthenheim or to the Duchess of Malplaquet, no man in his senses would hesitate. So he turned his back on the Russian, who was chatting with Desrolles and Delsarti and the Turkish Ambassador, without even the customary shrug, and awaited the event.

'Your Grace will excuse my running away, I am sure. I have an appointment which I had almost forgotten. Mesdames, Messieurs, *au revoir!*' And with a sweeping and comprehensive bow, Baron Juthenheim disappeared through the cleft in the rhododendrons.

The Duchess fanned the air with her handkerchief, which emitted a faint perfume, and leaned back with a complacent smile. Adela Melita had kept her back to the Russian, apparently oblivious of his presence.

'And the story, Duchess?' asked Szarvas, with an uplifting of eyebrow and moustache.

'It will serve again,' said the old lady; and the Princess Marie silently clapped the palms of her dainty gloves together.

'I wish you would tell it to me,' she said, 'so that I could use it on occasion also.'

'My dear, it is not adapted to your ears. Olga Petroff was his mother. It is scandalous of me even to hint at repeating it, but even a Russian Ambassador must respect my wishes or suffer for it. When do you want us to come to Vilova, Count?'

'Just as soon as you can make it convenient. Duchess.'

'Is that—man coming?'

'Well, I have had to invite him, you know——'

'Very well, let us know when his visit is concluded, then we will come.'

Basil bent to speak to the Princess, and the old lady, in her customary fluty coo, said—

'I did not know you two knew one another. Basil, *mon gars*, you are learning quickly. You sat as quiet as a mouse while I was singing the praises of my little friend here——'

'I have known Princess Marie less than half an hour, Duchess, though I feel already as though we were old friends.'

'Ach, so!' nodded the old lady complacently. 'I was telling him,' she said, turning to the Princess, 'that you reminded me of his mother.'

'That was very delightful of you, Duchess, but it makes me feel old beyond my years,' said the Princess.

'Ah, my dear! She was the noblest, and the most charming, and the most beautiful woman I have ever known.'

And the eyes of Basil Reigne and Marie Obdanovitch met and for a moment held one another.

The Turkish Ambassador withdrew. Adela Melita and the Countess came to join the other ladies on the seat, and Basil with a bow joined the gentlemen, but his thoughts were full of those wonderful dark eyes, and in some curious way his life felt suddenly enriched, as a man may feel at news of an unexpected legacy.

The mission on which he was about to start came back into his mind with a rush. He had never given it a thought since Marie Obdanovitch floated into view.

'By the way, Count,' he said, remembering the Chief's instructions to learn all he could before starting, about the man he was going to see, 'Delsarti says you know everything and everybody. Can you give me any information about a certain Chakri Pasha down in Constantinople?'

'Chakri?' said the Count, the ends of his moustache smiling up into his eyes. 'Well, yes, Chakri and I are very old friends. In fact, we are, I believe, related in some way. Our very distant common ancestor must have been, as you perceive, a distinctly handsome personage, for we are said to be very much alike. If I can be of any service to you, Mr. Reigne, pray command me. It is about the Slivovitza matter you want to see him, I suppose?'

'Thanks very much, Count. Is Chakri in Con-

stantinople just now, do you know?' asked Basil, without replying to the other's question.

'Ah, *mon ami*, that is beyond me. As a rule, no one ever knows where Chakri is until they have him "right there," as the American Minister says. But, in any case, Constantinople is the only place where you will pick up his tracks. You and Chakri will have great times together. How I wish I could be there! It will be amusing. When Greek meets Greek—and, by the way, Chakri is said to be partly Greek—or Armenian. Anyhow he is not full Turk. He won his Pashaship at Plevna under Osman, holds some post in the Foreign Department, and fills it admirably, because he is never there and so is a standing excuse for blocking business. He has several estates and numerous establishments, and passes most of his time at one or other of them. He has travelled and knows his way about, and in matters touching his own pocket you will find him as keen as a file, though he will, of course, try to come the indolent Turk over you. As to the oil wells about which those countrymen of yours are making so much trouble, I know all about them, for it was I who introduced them to the English syndicate, and from what I know of the district, I should say they have got hold of a very good thing indeed. What this claim of Chakri's may really amount to, of course I can't say. Chakri is a pretty tough lot and probably he won't give way without a fight. A reasonable compromise will be your likeliest way through the matter. If it's anything half as good as my old friend the Princess Czernorynski tumbled into up in Galicia, Chakri will hang on to it like grim death. Why, the Princess was absolutely out at elbows—couldn't afford more than six complete costumes a day last season at Nice—staked napoleons at the Casino, and looked mournful when she lost. Since they struck oil at her place up there she simply

doesn't know what to do with her money. She loses 20,000 francs a day at the tables with the most magnificent equanimity, and drives all the other women crazy with the bewildering variety of her dresses.'

The Count rattled all this off with an air of the greatest *bonhomie*, but there were an alertness and a keenness of quiet scrutiny in his glancing eyes which were not lost on Reigne, and he began to regret having applied for information to this omniscient gentleman.

The Duchess had risen and was making her farewells. 'No, if you please, Monsieur Desrolles, do not accompany us. We are going straight home. Adela sings at the Palace to-night. If you behave very nicely you may listen to her. Now we must go home and rest. Adieu, Messieurs! Marie, give me your arm. Anna, take charge of Adela, and do not let any one speak to her.'

The ladies sauntered away at the Duchess's pace, and Count Alex strolled after them.

'Well, *ma petite!*' said the old lady, gently patting the girl's arm on which her hand rested. 'And what do you think of my young Englishman?'

'I like him,' said the Princess simply. 'Tell me about him. How do you come to know him so well?'

'He is almost like one of my own. His father and mother were my very dear friends, and his brothers—*ay-di-mi!*—such splendid boys! and all dead within one year—one in Burmah, one in Egypt, one in India. Geoffrey, Jack, Cuthbert—all gone. I dandled them all on my knee when they were babies, each in his turn, and they are all gone, and I am left. That is the terror of old age, my dear, to see all one's friends passing, and to be left behind oneself.'

The Princess stroked the hand that rested on her arm, and the old lady hugged the arm closer to her side.

'And Basil is the only one left to the dear old man. They come of fine old stock, one of the very oldest in England, the Altamonts of Montalta. You see it in Basil. Every inch of him shows breeding. Not many royalties can show a purer strain, and in the Reignes and Altamonts it has never run thin and weak, for they have always married outside, and always followed their hearts. Their men are always men all through, clean, and strong, and sound, inside as well as out. It would be a better world to live in if there were more like them.'

'And his father is still alive?' asked the Princess, as the old lady fell silent and paced slowly along.

'Yes, Sir Geoffrey is still alive. He must be very lonely. But he has lived a full life and he has his memories. He is Lord Watermouth now. They wanted to make him Foreign Minister, Basil was telling me, but he wouldn't have it. What state he kept! I knew him as Ambassador at Rome, and at Berlin, and at Paris, and here in Vienna, and he was at St. Petersburg also. Basil was born there, and his mother died there. It is one of the traditions of the Altamonts to have at least one member of it in the diplomatic service, and when he reaches the top the family exhausts itself financially to enable him to fill the position in such style as they consider fit and proper. They look upon it as a duty they owe to their country, and cheerfully beggar themselves to carry it out. Basil will follow the family tradition, I suppose, unless——'

'Unless——?' asked the Princess, as the old lady stopped once more.

'Unless—something happens to prevent him. Ah! here we are at last, and here is Auguste with the carriage. Adieu, my dear! Adieu, Anna! We shall see you to-night at the Palace. Come early and sit with me.'

CHAPTER V

'ANOTHER RASCALLY SZARVAS'

'*EH bien! mes amis,*' said Desrolles, when the ladies had passed out of hearing. 'Did I speak truth? Is she not beautiful as a dream?—and rich!—*pfui!*' a castanet snap of finger and thumb conveyed to his hearers visions of wealth illimitable.

'Well now, my friend,' said Basil between puffs, as he lighted a cigar. 'I want you to be so good as to explain a remark you made a little while ago. You said the Princess was intended neither for Frenchman—meaning yourself, of course, which is perfectly comprehensible and quite satisfactory—nor Italian—meaning Delsarti here—nor for Englishman—meaning me, I presume—but just for—another—rascally—Szarvas.'

'Delsarti, *mon beau*, lend me a cigarette. I will repay you.'

'Try a cigar,' said Basil, handing him his case.

'Thanks—no! I know your cigars. I do not wish to miss hearing the Melita at the Palace to-night. Delsarti's little cigarettes fit me admirably.'

He puffed his cigarette in silence, and strolled meditatively to the seat and sat down.

'*Eh bien, mon ami?*' said Reigne, sitting down beside him. 'I never knew you silent for so long a time before.'

'Silence,' said Desrolles didactically, blowing out a volley of smoke, 'is the tombstone of an indiscretion.'

'Shade of King Solomon! Is Desrolles also among the wise men?'

But the Frenchman's only reply was another volley of smoke, and Reigne continued—

'The effect of a too sudden reversal of one's

ordinary characteristics is apt to be injurious, *mon ami*. Speak freely and eloquently, as is your wont, lest later on you suffer from the strain of this unwonted self-restraint.'

'You are inconsistent, *mon gars*. You advise mé to practise silence, and now you urge me to speak. I am counting sixty.'

'There is a time to speak and a time to keep silence—so the other wise man says. This is the time to speak.'

'All the same I prefer to keep silence.'

'Unfortunately you have roused my curiosity, and I shall give you no peace till it is satisfied. The subject happens to interest me.'

'So I perceive,' said Desrolles, with a grin; and then, with a shrug, 'Well, if you will have it, here it is. All the world knows—except Monsieur Reigne apparently—that Count Alex intends to keep the Obdanovitch millions in the family by marrying the Princess to his brother Rudolf. *Voilà tout.*'

'Ah!' said Reigne. 'And what says the Princess?'

'*Ma foi!* The Princess has a will of her own, and all her money is her own, but all the same the united efforts of the family may bring her to it.'

'The Princess objects, then?'

'So far, they say, she simply laughs at the idea, and no doubt she has faith in her own powers of resistance.'

'And brother Rudolf? I have not met him, I think.'

'No, he is not much in evidence at present. He is a wild youth about ten years younger than Count Alex. He is in retreat the last twelve months in consequence of some escapades which gained him a somewhat unenviable notoriety.'

'And what does the Princess's sister say to the arrangement?'

'Half-sister,' said Desrolles, 'that is how it comes

that the Princess is so very, very rich, and the Countess so very—not so very rich.'

'So!'

Desrolles was fairly launched, and he continued—

'The Princess Marie, my dear Reigne, is perhaps the wealthiest young woman in Europe, as she is certainly one of the most beautiful. All the money came to her from her aunt, the Princess Sophie Bolckowina, who inherited most fortunately, and hoarded most conscientiously, all through an unusually long life. She objected to Countess Anna's marriage and left everything to the Princess Marie. Szarvas's idea is to checkmate the old lady's unkind discrimination against himself by keeping her millions in the family by hook or by crook.'

'Just one word more, my dear Desrolles. Your information is always so exceedingly interesting and instructive—Why *rascally*?'

'Ah!' sighed Desrolles. 'Have I not atoned for my indiscretion? Let Rudolf Szarvas lie in peace, if that be possible to him. My breath shall not disturb even the ashes of his reputation.'

'*Soit!*' said the inexorable Reigne, 'but—*another* rascally Szarvas—I think that was the expression.'

'*Eh bien, mon ami*, bury it with the rest.'

But as he rose to go he said, with a meaning grin on his good-humoured little face, 'They do say that when Count Alex wants anything he gets it—in one way—or another. *Au revoir*, Messieurs.'

CHAPTER VI

MUSIC, ETC., HATH CHARMS

BASIL REIGNE betook himself to the Palace that night with more hopeful alacrity than he usually displayed on such occasions.

State concerts at the Hofburg, choice though they might be in the matter of music and singing, were apt to be a trifle heavy and formal, not to say dull, and their power of attraction, so far as he was concerned, had been of the slightest. But he found himself preparing for this particular concert, and then hurrying to it, with an eagerness which was refreshingly novel even to himself.

He wanted to be there in good time, for he knew that the Duchess of Malplaquet made a point of being early at every function she attended, and that, when once she had chosen her seat and occupied it, she never moved if she could possibly help it until it was time to depart. The old lady, in fact, considered that she showed to better advantage when sitting than when standing or walking, and she was perfectly right. Sitting, she was a *grande dame* of the old noblesse—stately, picturesque, and full of quaint and sprightly humour; standing, she was just an old lady bending over a stout ebony cane with a silver crutch handle and a long silver ferrule.

And so, as he had hoped, when he arrived in the great Redoutensaal, where the concert was to be held, he found Her Grace ensconced in a comfortable and carefully selected seat, exchanging murmured confidences with Count Benedorff, the Court Chamberlain.

She saw Basil the moment he entered the room with an assumed air of surprise at his overpunctuality, and an exultant feeling inside him that things were turning out as he had hoped.

A beckoning wave of her fan brought him across to her.

'You are early, *mon ami*,' said the Duchess. 'What is the meaning of it! It is not a common fault among you young people.'

He looked at her with a laugh in his frank grey eyes. Subterfuge, or any attempt at concealment

of motive, was an imbecility where the Duchess of Malplaquet was concerned.

'To tell you the truth, Duchess, I thought perhaps your kindness of heart might lead you to ask me to sit beside you. You see, I 'm half a stranger here yet and know almost nobody.'

'Yes, and——'

'Surely that is reason enough.'

'Quite, but still not all the truth. Perhaps it occurred to you that some one else might take pity on an old woman and think of coming to sit beside her also. Eh, *mon gars*? Well, so she will, and so you shall. This is your seat. Now sit down, and talk to me nicely till the mob comes in.'

'Have I ever had occasion to tell your Grace that you are the most delightful and charming old lady I ever knew?'

'I believe I have heard you say something of the kind before, my child.'

'Permit me to repeat it with all my heart. How is Madame Melita? None the worse for her meeting with Monsieur le Baron this afternoon, I trust. What a terrible and vindictive old lady it can be when it pleases. I hope I may never incur your anger, hatred, and uncharitableness, Duchess.'

'I reserve those things for those who deserve them, and this Juthenheim merits every ill that ever may befall him. Ah, Russia, how I do hate you! Country accursed! And yet I remember meeting Alexander, the father of the present one, in Paris when he was a young man, and almost liking him. He was a polished and courtly gentleman then, and a good-hearted man, and if they had spared him, and if the curse of the country had not been too much for him, he might have become as decent a soul as our good old Franz Josef here, but—ah, *tiens!* here come Marie and Anna. Basil, *mon cher*, give that chair to Princess Marie, and take you the next.

Anna, my child, sit here on my right. Now we are all comfortable. Szarvas, find yourself a seat behind; the chairs in front are all reserved for the corps diplomatique.'

The Duchess's arrangements were apparently satisfactory. Count Alex bowed and smiled suavely through his upturned moustache, and sought a seat in the rear.

The great room began to fill rapidly with brilliant uniforms and wonderful dresses and gleaming white shoulders, and eyes and jewels equally bright. The air hummed with the subdued murmur of many voices, and the great empty wilderness of a moment or two before, whose emptiness had been rendered only the more apparent by the serried rows of empty chairs, had blossomed like the rose, and was palpitating with life and beauty.

Then a sudden hush and a simultaneous rustle and scraping of chair legs on the polished floor, as the royalties entered and their guests rose to receive them. All except the Duchess of Malplaquet, who contented herself with placing both hands on her silver crutch and bowing over it and rising from her chair the hundredth part of an inch, just to show that the spirit, at all events, was willing, though the outer husk was frail and weak.

'*Tiens!*' whispered the old lady, 'Stephanie is back, and little 'Lisbeth with her, and both looking well too. They must have arrived this afternoon. The Empress is still at Ischl with her rheumatism——'

Then the concert began, and never in his life had Basil Reigne enjoyed a concert so much, for never before had he enjoyed companionship so entirely to his liking. It was like the sudden possession of a new sixth sense to be able to look round at that pure sweet face, radiant with all the goodness and graciousness of the pure sweet soul within—at those wonderful dark eyes, fit windows for the soul—at the

silken coils and delicate tendrils of her hair, which caught and meshed the heart of him, and held him more secure than bands of triple brass.

All the same, when Adela Melita sang he could not help but listen. For when the Melita sang, all her heart and soul went into her voice, and floated up to heaven on the full rich tones of it; and to many another heart in that great assembly her singing brought, as was its wont, strange and unaccustomed thoughts.

The sadness and gravity of the old Emperor's face softened and deepened. The Archduchess Stephanie scrupled not to use her handkerchief. Baron Juthenheim, just behind Franz Josef, sat grim and unmoved as a wooden image, save for the twitching of his bushy brows. Perhaps something inside him was touched with the knowledge that it was he, and such as he, and the country he so worthily represented, that had broken the Melita's heart and helped to make her voice.

When she ended there was a silence of many seconds, and then a low unusual murmur of applause and satisfaction.

'Isn't she magnificent?' whispered the Princess; and Basil, looking round, saw that though her lips were smiling her eyes were soft with tears.

'I never heard anything like it,' he said, and added, after a silence, 'It makes me think of things I had almost forgotten.'

'What things?' she asked, with a sudden impulse of unaffected friendliness for which the Melita's singing was not entirely unaccountable.

'It made me think of my mother, who died when I was seven,' he said slowly, 'and of a little sister who went at the same time. Is Madame Melita always as affecting as that?'

'Her life has been a very sad one. Have you ever heard her sing "Home, Sweet Home"?'

'No.'

'It is beyond all words the most touching thing I ever heard, especially to those who know her story. Russia broke her heart and her life—and I suppose helped to put all that into her voice.'

Twice during the evening, as he turned to speak to the Princess, Basil caught the gleam of Count Alex's eye on him, from his seat in the second row behind. Each time the Count was laughingly addressing his neighbour, and was apparently enjoying himself exceedingly, but somehow the quick suspicious side-glance of the dark eyes made Basil think more than once of that hunter of his at home at Watermouth, which he had to have shot lest it should be the death of him. He was not in the habit, however, of troubling himself about the way in which his fellows regarded him, though, indeed, his frank open nature made him so universal a favourite that looks of even veiled suspicion and distrust were a novelty to him.

The concert ended, and Franz Josef, with the Archduchess Stephanie on one arm and little Princess Elizabeth clinging affectionately to the other hand, went forward to say a few kindly words to the performers. With Adela Melita they stopped chatting for several minutes, for her story was known to them, and they too had had heartbreaking troubles.

'You are all coming to sup with me,' said Her Grace of Malplaquet, as the Princess helped her on with her wraps. 'Basil, *mon enfant*, you can walk with Count Alex. Anna, you and Marie will come with Adela and me in the carriage. *A bientôt*, Messieurs!'

CHAPTER VII

THE DUCHESS'S LITTLE SUPPER PARTY

DURING their short walk from the Hofburg to the Duchess of Malplaquet's hotel in the Park Ring, Count Alex chatted so briskly and merrily that Basil reproached himself with misinterpreting the looks of suspicion he had believed to be directed against himself during the concert. He was not of a suspicious nature, and always preferred looking on the bright side of a man's character until the other side obtruded itself in such a manner as to permit of no doubt, then he desired no further dealings with him.

The ladies were awaiting them in the small drawing-room.

'Ah, here you are, you two,' said the Duchess. 'We began to fear you had fallen out on the road, and that one of you had made away with the other and was afraid to put in an appearance.'

'On the contrary, your Grace, the Count has been so entertaining that I could hardly get here for laughing,' said Reigne, and Szarvas smiled suavely.

'When I find it necessary to make away with Mr. Reigne, my dear Duchess,' he said, 'I will promise to come and tell you all about it—after the event.'

'It is a promise,' said the Duchess, and added, 'We are still two short, but they will be here in a moment.'

The door opened as she spoke, and the Nicaraguan Ambassador, Don Stefan Valambroso, came in with another, whom the Duchess and Adela welcomed with all the quiet warmth of intimate friendship. He was apparently known to the rest of the party and greeted them all heartily.

'Countess, you grow younger every time we meet. Princess Marie, how many hearts have you broken since last I saw you? Ah, Szarvas, *mon ami*, didn't I tell you that newfangled propeller would never work? But you wouldn't take a plain sailor-man's word for it.'

He turned to Basil, and with hand and eye gave him hearty greeting.

'I feel as if I knew you, Mr. Reigne, and I know that when Her Grace of Malplaquet speaks well of a man, that is a man worth knowing'—with a laughing glance at the Duchess, who laughed back and nodded.

'I 'm afraid, your Highness'—for Basil knew him now for the Archduke Franz Johann, the sailor—'that the Duchess's kind heart sometimes blinds her to the faults of her friends.'

'Ta-ta!' bowed the Duchess, 'that, at all events, has never been said of me before.'

'I have been very fortunate in my Englishmen,' said the Archduke. 'I have never met one that I did not like. Do you know the Ellesmeres, Mr. Reigne? Charles Ellesmere is to my mind one of the finest men that ever trod a deck, and that boy of his is going to be just such another. You know him? There is something of the same look about you.'

'I have never met the boy, but Ellesmere and I were at Eton together. He was, of course, one of the big fellows, and I one of the little ones, but we are very good friends. Your Highness cannot speak more highly of him than he deserves.'

Here the sliding doors opened and disclosed the supper-table awaiting them in the adjoining room. The Sailor-Prince offered his arm to the hostess, and the rest followed and found their allotted seats.

The Duchess sat at the head of the table, with the Archduke on her right and Princess Marie on her left, facing one another. The Countess Szarvas sat next to the Princess, and Basil sat next to the

Countess. Adela Melita was next to the Archduke on the other side of the table, with Count Alex next to her, and Don Stefan occupied the other end facing the Duchess.

The conversation at first ran lightly on current topics of general interest, but by degrees the process of natural selection split the party into three groups, each following its own line, and each—outwardly, at all events—entirely satisfied with itself.

At first, in spite of his immediate liking for the man, Reigne had felt a not unnatural, doubtful curiosity as to the reasons which brought the Sailor-Duke there that night. But a very few minutes set his doubts at rest, and opened his eyes to the true situation of affairs, and a fellow-feeling drew his heart warmly towards the other, though how any man in the company of Marie Obdanovitch could look beyond her quite passed his comprehension.

From the gentle tones of the sailor's voice whenever he addressed Adela Melita direct, and the warm and tender glow in his eyes whenever he looked at her, Basil knew that it was she whom the Archduke came there to see, and he saw, too, that with all the others it was a recognized and accepted fact.

This was entirely satisfactory to him, and as the Archduke and Adela chatted quietly and happily together, and Don Stefan and Szarvas fell into a long discussion on the possibilities of Nicaragua as an opening for foreign capital, he devoted himself with immense enjoyment to Countess Anna and the Princess Marie, while, like an ancient Goddess of Love, grown old indeed, but not beyond the enjoyment of her powers, Her Grace of Malplaquet smilingly dropped a word into the conversation, first on this side of the table, then on that, and now and again threw an encouraging nod to Don Stefan whenever his roving eye caught hers.

And so an altogether delightful evening drew to

its close in the small hours of the morning, and as they rose to separate, the Duchess asked—

'And when does your Highness set sail again, and where is it to this time?'

'I am going to take a holiday,' he said. 'The routine of the service gets irksome at times even to me. I shall be yachting and shooting on the Adriatic for the next two months. Is there no hope of seeing your Grace down there? Zara—Ragusa—Spalato—Cattaro—they are all very tempting at this time of year, and a change to the sea would do both you and Madame Adela a world of good. The Boccha is magnificent. I think I shall make my headquarters there, at Cattaro.'

He looked at her wistfully.

'We are pledged to Anna and the Count at Vilova some time during the next month,' said the old lady. 'Exactly when depends on *ce diable* de Juthenheim. We don't visit at the same times and places as Monsieur le Baron.'

The sailor smiled. 'The poor Juthenheim! He does not seem to make too many friends.'

'Could your Highness not run over from Cattaro for some shooting?' said Countess Anna warmly. 'We should esteem it a very high honour, and we can certainly promise you good sport. We shall be just a family party. Mr. Reigne has promised to come, and Adela and the Duchess, and two or three friends of the Count's.'

'That is very kind of you, Countess, and I shall do my utmost to take advantage of the invitation. When did you say Juthenheim was going?'

'I will send you word to Cattaro, your Highness, the very hour he leaves, and,' she added mischievously, 'I shall send one to the Duchess at the same time. How would—" Bugbear gone, come along "—do?'

'That will do very nicely,' said the Archduke, 'and as soon as I receive that wire I shall start for Vilova.'

CHAPTER VIII

CULTIVATING AN ACQUAINTANCE

REIGNE'S departure in quest of Chakri Pasha was delayed beyond his expectations, but not by any means beyond his powers of endurance, by the non-arrival of some necessary papers from England. And meanwhile, by what seemed like a series of extraordinary coincidences, for the root origin of which, however, one might probably not have had to go very much beyond Her Grace of Malplaquet, he found himself constantly meeting the Princess Marie. He met her, too, each time with increasing enjoyment, and although as yet he hardly dared to say it to himself, he began at last to believe that the feeling was not entirely unreciprocated.

Those wonderful dark eyes of hers sparkled a welcome to him whenever they met, and he did not believe they had ever held an equivocation since first they opened. Which belief might, indeed, on the face of it, suggest more than a suspicion of youthful simplicity on his part. But then he had the advantage over most of us of sounding the depths of those beautiful eyes. And though disappointed souls may mumble still of the duplicity of woman, most of us have reason to be profoundly grateful that in the proving of the rule the exceptions are ours.

It is many years since then, and Marie Obdanovitch's eyes have looked out on stranger sights than most, but they have never lost that look of high essential verity which challenges all that is best in a man, and gives him twinges of regret for the things he would forget if he could. I have known men who met Marie Obdanovitch later in her life, and

they speak of her softly, as they would of their mothers and of those others who died and left them lonely.

To the Duchess of Malplaquet the position of minor providence was a keen delight. She had said to herself, ' These two are the most charming young things I have ever met. Why should they not mate ? ' and she bent all her energies to the task, little knowing how near she thereby came to bringing about calamity, as indeed is not infrequently the case when kindly, but necessarily purblind, minor providences meddle with things beyond them.

Afterwards she came to see that these well-intentioned efforts of hers, in this and other directions, had but tended towards the precipitation of the great catastrophe which later broke their lives. And some events there were indeed, in those terrible after-times, which even she herself was never informed of But even though the future with all its grim horrors had been set before her in all the plainness of print, or pictured on canvas in vividest reds and blacks, I doubt if she would have been turned from her purpose.

For she dearly loved these two, she dearly loved her rôle of governess to Cupid, and she very dearly loved her own way. And, in her seventy-odd years of very varied experience, she had cultivated a philosophic hopefulness which steadfastly refused to regard the dark side of things so long as the smallest glimpse of the bright side was possible.

While awaiting, then, those documents from London, which might arrive at any moment and start him on his quest for Chakri Pasha, Basil found it extremely to his taste to continue the acquaintance so pleasantly begun at Don Stefan's garden-party.

Wherever he was, and whatever he might be doing, the rare sweet face of Marie Obdanovitch,

with the uplifting and encouragement of its wonderful dark eyes, and the charming friendliness of its smiling lips, danced ever before him, and whenever it was not within his sight he found himself urgently craving the sight of it again. And so the house of the Countess Szarvas in the Kärntner Ring, and the hotel of the Duchess of Malplaquet in the Park Ring, found him a frequent, and at all times a warmly welcomed, visitor.

The warmth of his welcome at the house of Count Szarvas emanated, indeed, chiefly from the Princess Marie; but as it was the Princess Marie he craved the sight of, and the sound of, and the proximity to, that was quite satisfactory to him.

Countess Anna was always politely cordial, and indeed friendly whenever Count Alex was not there. And Basil wondered amusedly at times whether the restraint she showed when her husband was present might not be due to a hint from the master of the house that, while policy might dictate the advisability of keeping on terms of friendship with the 'verdammte Engländer,' there were limits beyond which one need not go, and that the narrower those limits the better he would be pleased.

But so long as the spark of welcome kindled in the bright eyes of Marie Obdanovitch at sight of him, Basil said to himself that it would take considerably more than a touch of frost on the part of Count Alexander Szarvas, or even of the Countess, to keep him from seeing her.

The Count was much away on his own concerns, keeping all his many irons hot. He went and he came, and gave no warnings of his comings and goings, and as a rule no mention of the direction of his journeyings to and fro. And if, by chance or otherwise, he now and again did render a pleasantly detailed account of some incident of his latest trip, Basil had to confess to himself that the relation did

not carry absolute conviction to the mind of one of his listeners, at all events.

To Reigne, however, he was always charmingly cordial, though Basil never quite got rid of the feeling of being under observation, and it seemed to him that no other eyes he had ever encountered held so many and so great reserves as did those of Count Alexander Szarvas.

In compliance with the inclination which was rapidly developing into a custom with him, he dropped into the house in the Kärntner Ring one afternoon, about a fortnight after the garden-party, and found the Princess alone, which was entirely to his liking.

They had come to be on very friendly terms these two. With the Duchess of Malplaquet as *dea ex machina* it could hardly have been otherwise. Far too knowing to be constantly sounding the praises of the one into the ear of the other, the astute old lady, nevertheless, by an occasional word here and a hint there, had succeeded in interesting them the one in the other to an extraordinary degree, and so, bit by bit, she was drawing round these two chief favourites of hers an invisible golden thread which brought them constantly closer and closer together.

It was of the Duchess herself, and of some of her quaint sayings and doings, that they were chatting when, at the sound of wheels before the door, the Princess said—

'That will be Anna back from her drive.' And presently the door opened and Count Alex entered.

Did a flicker of annoyance flit over the Count's face at sight of him? Basil could not be sure, but, in any case, what did it matter? He was there for his own pleasure and—dare he hope it?—for the pleasure of Princess Marie, not certainly for the pleasure of Count Alex.

'Ah, Monsieur Reigne!' said the Count gaily; 'still in Vienna?'

'Still here, Count.'

'And still without news of Chakri?'

'Still without news, Count. You don't happen to have come across him in your travels?'

'Not I,' said Count Alex, with a quick glance at him; 'it is long since I and Chakri met.'

'And where have you dropped from, Alex?' asked the Princess.

'From the skies as usual, *ma chérie*.'

'I wonder they could spare you,' she said.

'I was needed down below, you see. Unfortunately, the affairs of this world will not let one live up in the clouds altogether—will they, Mr. Reigne? What has become of Anna, Marie?'

'She is out driving. We thought you were she returning.' And then she added saucily, 'I expected Mr. Reigne would call, so I pleaded a headache.'

'What refreshing candour!' said the Count. 'Is it not inimitable, Mr. Reigne?'

'It is always charming,' said Basil.

'A pity it is so very rare,' sighed Count Alex. 'Life would be a very different affair for most of us if we lived in a Palace of Truth.'

'Have a cup of tea, Alex,' said the Princess; 'you sound tired.'

'*Merci!*' said the Count, with a smile, as she handed him the tea. 'And how is our dear old friend the Duchess of Malplaquet?'

'We were speaking of her when you came in,' said Basil; 'for some reason or other she has become greatly interested in your friend Chakri.'

'The d—ear old lady!' said Count Alex, stirring his tea slowly. 'What is troubling her about Chakri?'

'I 'm sure I don't know. I think he is a perpetual

puzzle to Her Grace, and she hates to be outside a thing. She is constantly inquiring about him from me, but unfortunately I can give her no information. In fact, I am open to all the information I can get on the subject myself.'

'Ah!' said the Count, 'you will know more about Chakri when you have seen him.'

'Yes, I 'll do my best to get to the bottom of him, if only to set the Duchess's mind at rest.'

'I was trying to find out for you where he is, but all I can learn is that he is not in Constantinople.'

'I shall evidently have to go there to get on his track,' said Basil.

'That is what I told you at first. When do you expect to start, Mr. Reigne?'

'I have no idea.'

Count Alex looked as if he would have liked to ask more, but their conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Countess Anna and the Duchess.

'Ah, ah, Count Chakri—*tiens!* my old head is getting muddled,' cried the old lady. 'I was talking Chakri to the Turkish Ambassador when Anna picked me up and insisted on my coming for a cup of tea. And how goes it, Count? You look tired. Business troublesome?'

'Quite troublesome enough, Duchess, as it generally is when you are dealing with Turks.'

He spoke less jauntily than usual, and Basil noticed, as he had not noticed before, that he certainly looked more worried than was his wont.

'And what is it now?' asked the old lady.

'Harbour works—Bourgas,' he said briefly.

'Ah, you will burn your fingers there, *mon ami*, unless you are very careful. Von Rosen could not carry it through, and Blanckenfeldt sank two millions, they say, before he dropped it.'

'I have got the Baron behind me,' he said briefly.

'Ah—well! Let us hope you will fare better than

the others. Basil, *mon gars* ! ' she chattered on. ' I have been trying to get some news of Chakri for you. But I have not yet succeeded. He seems an elusive soul.'

' That is very kind of your Grace,' said Basil. ' I must take the will for the deed. I am not anticipating any great personal enjoyment from meeting Chakri. I shall begin to believe you all want to get rid of me, and think the best way to do it is to discover Chakri for me.'

' *Ja wohl !* ' said the old lady. ' It is a sign of our extreme interest in you. No more tea, Anna, thank you. Basil, my child, you may see me home.'

The next day as Basil was strolling towards the house in the Kärntner Ring he met Count Alexander at the corner of the Schwarzenberg Strasse coming the opposite way.

' Ah, Monsieur Reigne, have you by chance seen the ladies in the Park ? I am seeking them. You also ? Shall we then proceed together, if you do not mind my keeping you waiting just one second in the Kärntner Strasse ? '

Reigne perforce turned and walked with him.

' Marie's headache is better to-day,' said Szarvas, with a whimsical glance at Reigne.

' And the Countess ? ' said Basil. ' I trust she is well.'

' Anna is quite well, thank you. She does not suffer from headaches.'

As they passed along the crowded street they came suddenly face to face with the strange figure of a woman—a woman of the people—but of a strange people, to judge by her appearance. Her face was dark and handsome, her figure tall and supple, her eyes black and piercing, but she wore an air of dispirited wistfulness as she scrutinized the passers-by, and she seemed very tired and wayworn.

A sudden startled ejaculation, as the two men

passed by her, one on each side, drew Reigne's eyes to her face again, and he saw the hopeless weariness drop from it like a mask and give place to a joyful wonder as she turned and stood looking after them. She said some words in a language with which Basil was not familiar, and then the Count turned to him laughingly and said—

'Is the lady of your acquaintance, Monsieur Reigne? I do not think I have had the pleasure of meeting her before.'

'Nay, I know nothing of her,' said Basil, as they turned and went on their way. 'What country is she of?'

'Bulgarian, I should say. Good-looking too, but probably crazy.'

The pavements were well filled with slow-moving strollers, and their progress was much impeded.

'This is very slow work,' said the Count. 'Suppose we take a carriage, we shall get on quicker,' and he raised his stick and signalled to a passing driver.

As they stepped in Basil got an impression of the stranger woman pressing through the crowds towards them. Then the driver whipped up his horses, and they rolled away towards the Park. They failed to find the ladies, however, and Count Alex surmised that they had gone on to make some calls, and suggested an adjournment to the Club, which Basil could not well refuse.

The Count was in an unusually gay mood, though it seemed to Basil that his high spirits were somewhat forced occasionally, and more than once he thought he caught the shadow of a tense look on his face, as though serious matters of business would at times obtrude and had to be kept back by a strong effort of will. He pressed upon Basil an invitation to dine with him at the Club, with so much insistence that escape was out of the question. And so, with his eyes wide open to the fact that this sudden out-

burst of hospitality had nothing of spontaneity in it, but was dictated solely by the Count's desire to put his spoke in the wheel of the Princess Marie's growing intimacy with him, Basil had perforce to put the best face he could on the matter, and to assume for the time being a reciprocity of good-fellowship which he was very far from feeling.

Count Alex personally had no great attraction for him, but inasmuch as he was brother-in-law to the Princess Marie, he had to be borne and reckoned with. The Englishman had to confess, however, that the more he saw of him the less was he attracted by him, and he strove honestly to argue himself out of this feeling. He reproached himself with his insularity, his prejudice, his narrow-mindedness, and many other unpleasant qualities, the presence of which in his nature prevented him—he said to himself—accepting the Count's advances in the spirit in which they seemed to be made. But he had to acknowledge, after each meeting with Szarvas, that he knew less and less of the real character of the man, and the more he saw of him the less he seemed to know him. He was immensely clever, of that there could be no doubt. He was invariably genial, perhaps just a trifle too punctiliously so; and, with reservations in one particular quarter where too close an intimacy might interfere with his own plans, he had shown himself hospitably inclined. But Basil recognized that in the complex character of Alexander Szarvas there were depths beyond his fathoming. In a word—he could not bring himself entirely to trust the man, and yet, for obvious reasons, he did not wish to break with him, or to afford him any reasons for breaking with himself.

It was late when they parted, after a sufficiently entertaining evening, and Basil's feelings, as he strolled homewards, summed themselves up comprehensively enough in a half-amused and wholly

fervent 'Hang the Count!' and a regretful sigh for the missed opportunity of a visit to the Princess.

He had barely parted from Szarvas when the stranger woman, whom they had met in the afternoon, passed him hurriedly, and it struck him as somewhat of an odd coincidence that, of all the multitudes in Vienna, he should run across this woman twice in the same day. He turned and looked after her, and to his surprise she came hastily back and began to speak to him vehemently in a language which he did not understand. He shook his head as she pointed after the Count and apparently asked some question concerning him. Then, seeing she was not understood, she turned with an exclamation of annoyance and pressed on after Szarvas. It seemed to Basil that the Count had seen her address him and was purposely sauntering slowly so that she might come up with him. However—as he said to himself—it was no concern of his, and he turned and went on his way towards the Metternichgasse.

CHAPTER IX

EXPLANATIONS AND UNDERSTANDINGS

'MAY I express the hope that you had a very enjoyable drive yesterday?' said Basil to the Princess, when he found himself at the house in the Kärntner Ring on the following afternoon.

'That is very kind of you, Mr. Reigne,' said the Princess, smiling enigmatically.

'The Count and I were looking for you in the Prater,' he said, as she waited for him to continue, 'but we were not fortunate enough to find you.'

'That was very disappointing,' she said, 'but apparently you both managed to bear up under the affliction, and are none the worse for it. What did

you do to Alex last night to make him so cross when he came in, Mr. Reigne ? '

' I ? I 'm sure I don't know, Princess. He was all right when I left him, and seemed in the highest of spirits.'

' Really ? He was as cross as a bear when he came in, and started off this morning at daylight for somewhere or other, I don't know where.'

' He said nothing about it to me. But I should imagine the Count is not much in the habit of consulting other people as to his comings and goings.'

' He is not over communicative—as a rule.' And after a pause, with her eyes asking questions, she said, ' Sometimes he tells us things we do not particularly want to know. As for example, yesterday.'

' Oh ! And what interesting information did the Count give you yesterday, Princess ? '

She hesitated, and then said, ' It seems rather like telling tales out of school, but—I have a reason, Mr. Reigne. Alex told us that he met Mr. Reigne, and Mr. Reigne insisted on carrying him off to the Cercle des Etrangers, and on his spending the evening with him there—and elsewhere.'

She saw the young Englishman's jaw tighten behind the angry flush on his cheek, but he did not speak.

' Tell me just how it was, Mr. Reigne,' she said presently, as he remained silent. ' I have a reason for wishing to know.'

' Well, it is a little too bad,' he said after a pause. ' Apparently I was not only sacrifice but scapegoat also to the Count last night.'

The Princess said nothing, but her dancing eyes invited him to proceed.

' Were you out driving yesterday, Princess ? '

' We were not,' she replied. ' The weather looked threatening, and we decided to stop in.'

' Ah ! ' He laughed, a little angrily, and then said,

'As you say, it sounds like telling tales out of school, but one's character is at stake. I met Count Szarvas as I was on my way here. He said you and the Countess were driving in the Park, and suggested our going to seek you. We failed to find you—because you were not driving in the Park or anywhere else. The Count said you were intending to make some calls and invited me to accompany him to his Club, and then insisted on my dining and spending the evening with him. *Voilà*, Mademoiselle!'

Their eyes met for a moment in a laugh of mutual understanding. No further word passed between them on the matter, but their friendliness suffered no eclipse from this trifling exposure of the Count's feelings towards it.

At this moment Monsieur Desrolles and Signor Delsarti were announced, and the Princess welcomed them so gaily and warmly that they both, not knowing whence her high spirits came, wondered for a moment whether they might not have made an impression in that quarter, and whether there might not be some hope for them after all. But when they caught sight of Reigne their spirits sank somewhat.

'Reigne, *mon ami*,' said Desrolles. 'Where were you hiding last night? You were wanted at the Club, and nobody knew what had become of you.'

'And what was the reason for the sudden run upon me, my dear Desrolles? A fourth hand needed for your whist party, or was the Club chimney on fire and none of you knew what to do?'

'No. The Lord High Admiral of Great Britain and Ireland, and of the Empire on which the sun never rises—sets, I mean—was seeking you in company with the Archduke Franz Johann. Though why on earth they should want——'

'Ta-ta!' said Basil. 'The Lord High Admiral? Now who could that be? Who was it, Signor

Delsarti? It is hopeless to get any useful information out of the representative of France. He is *farceur* all through and all the time.'

'It was a great, tall, big, broad blonde with blue eyes and clean-shaven face. *Tiens!* "She-Mother," was it not, you said his name was?'—to Desrolles.

'Quite right! Good boy, Delsarti! Always stick to my translations of the barbarous language. They are always literally correct and do me credit.'

'She-Mother?' said Basil, still mystified. 'Who the dickens was it? Talk sense for a moment, Desrolles, if it is possible to you.'

'Ah, the Dickens!—The Immortal—the Invisible —no, the Inimitable! Olivaire Tweest and Peekveek, I have them at my fingers' ends. *Eh bien, mon ami*, it was your friend Ellesmere, "She-Mother," is it not?'

'Ellesmere?' said Basil. 'And where is he stopping?'

'He is not stopping at all, as I understood. He was passing through to Constantinople, I believe, and had but a few hours to spare.'

'I 'm sorry I missed him.'

'Ah well, no doubt you were enjoying yourself elsewhere, *mon ami*, and it is not possible even for the representative of Great Britain to be in two places at the same time. My Lord High Admiral and Franz Johann mitigated their grief with many strong cigars and much laughter, and seemed to enjoy themselves in spite of your absence.'

'He was at school with me,' said Basil to the Princess. 'He 's a splendid fellow.'

'I have met him,' she said, with a smile, 'and Lady Ellesmere also. She is very charming. They were at Cannes the year before last. Lord Charles had a wonderful yacht there which won every race he entered for, and I had several very pleasant trips with them.'

He found pleasure even in so small a thing as the fact of their having friends in common.

'Have you seen the Duchess of Malplaquet to-day, Monsieur Desrolles?' asked the Princess.

'N—o,' replied Desrolles; 'we called there as we came along, but she and Madame Adela were out.'

'And you thought they might be here?' laughed the Princess.

'Well, we thought it not absolutely impossible, Princess.'

'They are upstairs with Anna. They will be down in a few minutes.'

'I wonder if Count Szarvas is in,' said Desrolles. 'I have some information which he begged me to get for him, and which I know he is anxious to have.'

'He started at daybreak this morning for Timbuctoo or Thibet, or some such place,' said the Princess.

'That's odd,' said the Frenchman with surprise. 'He begged me most urgently to get this information, and I know it is just what he wants. Do you happen to know where he has gone? Will it be possible for me to send it after him?'

'"The Count Alexander Szarvas—*En route!*"—*might* find him, Monsieur Desrolles, but I should doubt it. It is, however, the only address we have, as a rule. Perhaps Mr. Reigne can tell you where he has gone. They spent the evening together.'

'I have no idea,' said Basil. 'I am not in the Count's confidence. When we parted last night he certainly did not give me any impression of having to make an early start for anywhere.'

'H'm!' said Desrolles, 'well, it must wait. Ah, here is Madame Adela. Duchess, your most humble obedient servant.'

'Now I wonder how you two knew we were here,'

said the old lady, looking at them as though they were a pair of truant schoolboys.

'Instinct, your Grace—assisted by a call at your hotel.'

'Ach, so! I must tell them at the hotel that they are lacking in discretion.'

'We forced the information at the point of our walking-sticks. The hall-porter is still in a state of collapse. Is it not so, Delsarti?'

'But yes, truly!' laughed the Italian.

'He will be drunk to-night,' nodded the old lady sagely, 'and will probably be discharged to-morrow. Basil, my child, you are in disgrace here with Anna for keeping the Count out nearly all night and sending him packing by daybreak this morning. What have you got to say for yourself?'

'Nothing, Duchess; my lips are sealed.'

'Then I will not waste my breath. Now if it was you, Monsieur Desrolles, I would exert myself in the belief that it would not be time wasted.'

Desrolles, who was talking to Adela Melita, had not caught the context, but gathered that the Duchess was paying him some compliment.

'Your Grace does me too much honour,' he said, and wondered why the others laughed.

'Perhaps you can tell me where the Count has gone, Countess?' he asked, turning to her.

'No. I do not know, Monsieur Desrolles. When he gets one of these sudden calls he flies off at a moment's notice, and we do not know where he is till we see him again.'

'It is none too comfortable, *par exemple*!' murmured the Duchess in Reigne's ear. And to the Countess, 'I hope he won't put his fire out with having too many irons in it, Anna, my child, though I have seen that happen before this.'

'Alex is a law unto himself,' said the Countess quietly, 'and we never question his doings.'

But Reigne, glancing suddenly at her, found himself wondering if her heart was as much at ease as that tranquil face would have led one to suppose. And in his own mind he doubted it, and in his heart felt a twinge of regret on her account.

CHAPTER X

IN QUEST OF THE PASHA

THE expected documents arrived at length from London, and Basil paid a hasty farewell visit to the Duchess, and to Countess Anna and the Princess, and that same night boarded the seven o'clock express for Buda Pesth, Belgrade, and Constantinople.

He had not seen or heard of the Count since that very sudden business call had summoned him away three days before. He was not, however, greatly surprised when, on stepping into the station restaurant at Buda Pesth for supper, the first person he saw was Szarvas himself, seated comfortably at table and half-way through a substantial meal.

'*Hola*, Reigne, *mon ami!*' he cried, with a welcoming wave of the hand. 'Really *en route* at last?'

'Really *en route* at last,' said Basil, taking a seat opposite to him, and rapidly selecting and ordering his dishes, 'and whither may you be bound, Count? You left very suddenly the other day. Desrolles was quite disappointed at not being able to give you some information he had obtained for you.'

'That was very good of him, but it will keep all right. I 'm just running over to Bourgas again, so I can keep you company nearly all your way—at all events, as far as Tirnova. Then I shall probably slip along to Vilova to see that everything is in

order for the shooting next month. And you, *mon ami*, have you picked up any traces of Chakri yet ? '

Reigne shook his head, and devoted himself to his hasty meal.

' Ridiculously short time they give you to feed here,' he said, ' especially when one's train comes in ten minutes behind time.'

' The American Minister told me he got a first-rate meal, and had time for a look round the town while the train stopped, the last time he passed through here,' said the Count, smiling.

' He is a very great man,' said Reigne, sententiously. ' I 'm afraid my internal machinery is built on old-fashioned lines, and lacks the latest Western improvements. Hang that train, is it off ? '

' Five minutes more,' said Szarvas. ' Now, waiter, hurry up with that coffee. Yes, two cognacs ! Now the bill ! Keep the change ! *En route, mon ami*,' and they raced for the train.

' You 've secured a berth for the night, I suppose,' said the Count as they scrambled into the smoker. ' What 's your number ? '

' Twenty-two. I want a smoke first and then I 'll turn in. Where do we breakfast ? '

' Belgrade, between six and seven. Earlier turn-out than you 're accustomed to, I expect.'

' No, I 'm out for a gallop every morning soon after seven. It 's the best part of the day, I always think.'

They fell into desultory talk over their cigars till they were finished, then sought their rumbling couches, Szarvas insisting on seeing that his friend had all the conveniences to which he was entitled, and putting him up to several wrinkles tending towards additional comfort on a none too comfortable journey.

All the next day they ran through the rolling Servian plains, till the yellow stretches of maize and wheat, the dark green tangles of vineyards, the miles

of plum orchards, the rich green pastures with their fattening herds and droves of pigs, began to pall upon them, and Reigne was not unthankful for the relief the Count's company afforded from the monotony of the journey.

Szarvas had travelled much, and had seen life under many aspects. He had travelled with his eyes open, was a good raconteur, and laid himself out to amuse and entertain his companion, and to get within the fences of his insular reserve. Not the least amusing part of his entertainment to Reigne—and it acted the part of sauce piquant to all the rest of the dish—was the ingeniously ingenuous manner in which he hovered around the object of the young Englishman's journey, and attempted, in a dozen different ways and on a dozen different occasions, to quietly pump him on the subject. No matter where he started from—pigs, or plums, or the domestic troubles of Milan and Natalie, the abduction of Alexander, or the grit of Osman at Plevna—the conversation invariably trended sooner or later towards Chakri, and the oil wells, and the disputed strip of territory at Slivovitza. It became at last a matter of keen enjoyment to Reigne to scent his adversary's cloven-footed moves from afar, to pretend to drop into the snare, and then quietly to administer check whenever the position began to show signs of a corner.

Count Alex took his repulses with the greatest good-humour, started some other topic, miles away from the last, and circled round and round, nearer and nearer, as Mayne Reid's Indians used to do round the hero and his friends crouching in the centre behind their horses, till—ping! came the little barbed question for which Reigne had been on the look-out—then snub and check—and the Count chose another subject and made a fresh start.

It was an endless game of thrust and parry, both

fencers maintaining a gentlemanly hold upon their tempers, and Basil contriving even to feel humorously grateful to the Count for this polishing of one corner-stone in his diplomatic education.

'I would give a good deal to be present at your interview with Chakri,' sighed the Count once again. 'It 'll be an all-night sitting at the very least, and you 'll both smoke yourselves green, and drink so much very strong coffee that you won't sleep for a week—that, at all events, will be the effect upon you, *mon ami*—and you 'll both be as surly as a couple of sick dogs for two days after it. But if you 'll take my advice, Monsieur Reigne, you 'll meet him with a tempting offer by way of compromise, and if those wells are what I am told they are, your people can very well afford to do it. Cash down is a mighty big inducement to a Turk, no matter who he is or what position he 's in.'

'What 's this place we 're coming to, Count ? '

'Sofia and dinner. We 're nearly an hour behind time. I shall turn in early to-night, as I have to turn out at Tirnova soon after midnight.'

They drew in to Sofia just at sunset. Szarvas accompanied Reigne to the station restaurant and ordered dinner, and then hurried out to send off a telegram to his agent at Tirnova.

'We shall be close on two hours late, I expect,' he said, 'and he is quite capable of going off and leaving me stranded in that cursed hole of a station till morning. So I 'll just nail him to a bench till I arrive.'

Dinner was served by the time he got back, growling at the stupidity of the operators. However, he ate his meal with good appetite, and swung into the smoking-car in the best of spirits. .

'Now just one cigar and then I 'll say "good-bye" to you, Mr. Reigne, and tuck myself up in my little bed, and dream of the meeting between you and

friend Chakri. Don't forget to tender him the assurance of my highest esteem, and say I live in hopes of meeting him again some day. And—don't forget what I 've said—compromise the Slivovitza matter on any terms you can. Chakri has rights and he knows it, and he can be a perfect devil when he tries. Now, adieu, *mon ami*, and *au revoir !* and a safe and prosperous journey to you ! If you take my advice you 'll get early to bed too.'

CHAPTER XI

THE REACH OF THE LONG ARM

HE shook hands cordially with Reigne and went off to his virtuous couch, and the Englishman, saying to himself that he would do likewise as soon as he had smoked one more cigar, settled himself into a comfortable corner, in all the absolute complacency engendered by a good dinner and a monotonous railway journey—a feeling of perfect peace and goodwill towards all the world and himself—and fell fast asleep.

He awoke with a start and found himself cold and stiff. He thought he had heard a crash or a smash, but the train was grinding slowly along, evidently working up a steep gradient, and the air was raw and chill. He stood up and stamped the pins and needles out of his feet, and looked at his watch. It was half-past ten.

' We must be climbing the Balkans,' he said to himself. ' I guess I 'll turn in. I wonder what that row was—or was it only the tail-end of a dream ? '

He sauntered away to find his sleeping-berth, but as soon as he entered the carriage he saw that something had happened. The attendant and a number of passengers in more or less scanty attire were

standing looking into the compartment he had occupied the night before, and a buzz of excited talk was going on.

'*Hola!*' he said. 'What 's wrong here?'

'*Dieu-de-dieu!* Monsieur did well not to go to bed to-night,' said the porter. 'See!' and he made way for Reigne to look in.

Something certainly had happened, but for a time he could not make out what it was, and the porter insisted on everything being left just exactly as it was, till the authorities could view it and take the matter in hand.

The other passengers found it cold work standing there discussing a matter beyond their comprehension. The window of the compartment was broken, and the keen night air of the Balkans came in like a knife and sought out the weak spots in their makeshift costumes, and with strange and wondering oaths they one by one crept back to their beds, till only Reigne and the porter remained.

'Now, what is all this?' asked Reigne.

'But Monsieur can see for himself. I know no more than Monsieur. I heard a crash and found—this,' and he waved his hands comprehensively towards the wrecked compartment.

'But what on earth did it?'

The man shrugged, and Basil felt the cold creep down his back as he peered into the compartment again.

The glass of the window lay in fragments over the bed, mixed with splinters of the woodwork of the window frame—the pillow and sheets of the bed were tumbled and torn and full of ragged holes—the partition at the head of the bed was honeycombed with holes, and as Basil stepped close and poked the torn pillow with his finger, a rifle bullet fell out and rolled tinkling along the coverlet among the pieces of broken glass.

'Good heavens!' he said. 'What 's the meaning of it? Was it a bomb or what?'

'But, Monsieur, I know not. I know nothing about it, except that it came from the outside, just as we topped the ridge. A good thing Monsieur was not sleeping there, or, *ma foi*, we should have had difficulty in wakening him in the morning. Has Monsieur any enemies about?' he asked suddenly.

'Enemies?' said Reigne. 'No, I 've no enemies about. You think this dose was intended for me?'

The man shrugged again, and suddenly bent forward and picked off the bed a piece of glass about three inches square, in the middle of which was stuck a round, white gummed ticket with serrated edge.

'*Tiens!*' said he. 'What the devil is this? My windows don't carry tickets as a rule. Now, who in the name of the good God stuck that there?' He looked inquisitively at Reigne, and then added, 'And Monsieur is sure he has no enemies about?'

'Quite sure,' said Reigne. 'Now where the deuce am I going to sleep to-night? Have you a spare bunk?'

'Not one, Monsieur, but if Monsieur will stop in the smoking compartment till after Tirnova I can give him a bed then. A gentleman descends there from the next carriage.'

'All right. Call me when you 're ready,' and Reigne went thoughtfully back to the smoker, that diabolical white gummed ticket sticking in his mind as persistently as it stuck to its bit of broken glass.

He picked out the warmest corner and lay down on the seat, with the great fur collar of his Russian travelling coat well up round his ears, and presently the monotonous rumble of the train sent him off to sleep again, and he only awoke when the attendant of the sleeping-car shook him violently by the arm and informed him that his bed was ready. They had passed through Tirnova about two o'clock, and Count

Alex had no doubt descended and gone on his way, supposing him to be sleeping comfortably in his bed. After his broken night he slept late into the morning, and the flashing blue waves of Marmora were in sight before he turned out and began to dress.

CHAPTER XII

A BRITISH WELCOME

REIGNE was heartily glad to set foot to earth again after forty hours of the Orient Express, and was still more satisfied when his carriage, with all his baggage piled on the seat in front of him, cleared Galata and trundled past the long line of hotels and the pleasant greenery of the Assembly Gardens, and turned into the gates of the British Embassy.

Here a truly British welcome awaited him, and he found himself very comfortably at home within five minutes of setting foot on British territory. His Excellency was a very old friend of his father. Their estates marched together down in the West Country, and many a boyish escapade had little Basil carried out in conjunction with those two wild tomboys, the Ladies Elaine and Enid Caerleon, down at Montalta, while their respective fathers were serving their country in distant lands, and their mothers lay quietly sleeping in their foreign graves, and their governesses held up impotent hands of amazement, and gave them up in despair.

Basil reminded the two handsome, well-groomed, tailor-gowned young ladies, whose fair fresh faces and freedom and grace of carriage told of early morning tubs and plenty of wholesome exercise, and who met him with such frank and hearty greeting, of some of their old-time pranks, and the girls enlarged the

scope of their mutual reminiscences, and almost hurt themselves with laughing over them.

And all through lunch it was—

'And, Basil, *do* you remember that time when we dammed the brook at the bottom of the paddock——?'

'And Eny tumbled in head over heels——'

'I can just see her coming out,' laughed Basil. 'I have never seen such a pitiful face since.'

'And oh, Basil, *do* you remember Mademoiselle Vieuxtemps——?'

'Let me see, that was the one who wore blue specs, wasn't it?'

'No, no; that was Fräulein Schönhäusen——'

'I remember—*Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! mes enfants*——' and he threw up his hands with the fingers pointing up and the palms out, and cast up his eyes just as poor Mademoiselle Vieuxtemps was in the habit of doing when her young charges came in in a state of more than usual disintegration and dishevelment.

'Yes, that was Mademoiselle,' laughed the girls.

'You had such a rapid succession of governesses,' said Basil, 'that it is not easy to spot them after this lapse of time.'

'We were an awful pair, weren't we?' confessed Enid.

'Trio, if you please,' said Elaine. 'Basil was always the one who got us into mischief.'

'Eny, Any, Iny, Ony, Uny!' said Basil, quoting some old jingle of their tomboy days, and that started them all off again, till His Excellency could not see his plate for the tears of laughter that filled his eyes over their madcap memories.

It was a most enjoyable lunch, and when the young ladies began laying out excursions for him for many days ahead, Basil devoutly hoped that the elusive Chakri, whose whereabouts he had come to

discover, would still lie low for at least a week or ten days, to enable them to carry out all their plans.

It was with some little trepidation, therefore, that he at last inquired of His Excellency as to the progress that had been made in his inquiries, and it was distinctly satisfactory to him when the old gentleman replied—

'No, I 'm sorry to say, we haven't been able to learn yet where he is. He 's a most extraordinary fellow, is Chakri. He 's miles away the smartest man they have in the Foreign Department here. He has a good deal of influence, too, but he 's never here when he 's wanted, and he does more to block us than all the rest of them put together.'

'Why do the authorities put up with it? Why don't they chuck him?'

'Because, my dear boy, he 's just the very man for the post, and plays their game to perfection. When things get awkward they can always gain time by playing Chakri. When things get very awkward and threats of ultimatums begin to fly about, then Chakri turns up smiling, and takes hold and smooths 'em over. He 's as sharp as a file and as slippery as the devil. You 'll have a tough job with him, my boy, and I wish you well out of it. I never knew of any man who got ahead of Chakri yet, unless he had an ultimatum in his pocket and was quite prepared to fling it at him.'

'Yes, I 'm told he 's a hard nut to crack. But I intend to crack him and pull off this job one way or another. I 've been getting some points about him. Do you know Count Alexander Szarvas, my Lord?'

'Szarvas—Szarvas? I know the name well enough, but I don't know that I 've ever met him. Who is he?'

'He 's in Vienna—at least, he 's there when he 's not elsewhere, which he generally is.'

'Irish, surely,' commented Elaine.

'He 's mixed up in a great many financial schemes,' continued Reigne, 'and is all over Europe at a moment's notice. He knows this man Chakri, and pretty well everybody else, and, incidentally, he has been giving me points as to the best way of handling the Pasha in regard to this Slivovitza matter.'

His Excellency nodded.

'Szarvas jumped to the Slivovitza idea the moment I asked him if he knew anything about Chakri. He seems quite *au fait* of the whole matter, and he strongly advises us to compromise on the best terms obtainable; but he acknowledges that Chakri is a scorcher, and will open his mouth pretty wide.'

His Excellency nodded again musingly.

'There 's no fear of the two being in collusion, is there?' he asked.

'I shouldn't think so. Anyway, I have never discussed the matter with him in any shape or form. I simply asked him if he knew where Chakri was to be found, and he dived straight into Slivovitza, and gave me his views at length. He seems to know pretty nearly everything that is going on.'

'H'm! Rather a dangerous customer to discuss anything confidential with.'

'Yes. He came down with me as far as Tirnova. He was going to Bourgas, or some such place, and his attempts at pumping me on this Chakri matter were highly amusing, but not very satisfactory as far as he was concerned.'

'Well, we may learn any day where the Pasha is in retreat, and meanwhile you must let the girls show you what is worth seeing round Constantinople. It may be a week, it may be more, before we corner him. You see he 's a wealthy man—at least, I suppose he is. He certainly ought to be from the way he carries on. He has a great house in Stambul, another up the Bosphorus, another at Brusa, a big shooting-place up in the Rhodopes, and how

many more I can't say. He keeps up a big establishment at each place, and is always on the move from one to another. Twice within the last week we have been definitely informed that he was at one or other of these places, and each time my messenger came back with a long face to say that the information was incorrect.'

'He seems a mighty troublesome beggar to get hold of,' said Reigne, 'and I presume the real trouble will only begin when we do get hold of him.'

'That 's so,' said His Excellency; 'then your band will begin to play, and I wish you well through with it. Of all the slippery, twisty dev——'

'Now, daddie, don't swear any more,' said Elaine. 'I hope you won't find the slippery gentleman for at least a week, and we want two Fridays in the week to give Basil a fair idea of what this place is like.'

'And why two Fridays in the week?' asked Basil.

'It 's their Sunday here, you know, and you see more of the people that day than any other. The swells go up the Bosphorus to Anadoli Hissar—the Sweet Waters of Asia, a lovely place across the water—and the others go up the Golden Horn to the Sweet Waters of Europe, which is not so lovely; but you ought to see them both. And then there 's the Selamlik on Friday too. We can do that and the Golden Horn this Friday, and then take the whole of next Friday for the Sweet Waters of Asia.'

'And you must see Ayub,' said Enid.

'And the Seraglio, of course,' said her sister.

'And St. Sophia, and as many more mosques as you care for.'

'Your work 's cut out for you, my boy,' laughed His Excellency; 'these girls of mine are indefatigable. I don't suppose there 's a spot within twenty miles that they haven't been to.'

'And we *must* run up to Therapia, just to see how the house is getting on. If you 'd come a month later we should all have been there,' said Elaine. 'It 's ever so much nicer than this place. What about the launch, father? When will she be ready?'

'Not for at least ten days,' replied her father. 'I saw Macleod this morning, but he 's got her all to pieces, giving her a thorough overhaul.'

'Then we 'll have to put up with caïques,' said Elaine.

'I 'm quite glad,' said Enid. 'The Bosphorus loses half its charm to me when I go chuff-chuffing about it in a steam launch. You can evolve some sentiment in a caïque, but a steam launch shakes it all out of you.'

'Pouff!—sentiment!' said Elaine briskly. 'It 's not a question of sentiment, but of getting about quickly and comfortably. Caïques are too crank for my liking, and the caïquejes are a set of lazy loafers. They always make me hanker for a riding-whip. We shall see if Basil can put some life into them.'

CHAPTER XIII

THE LONG ARM AGAIN

THE energetic girls carried out to the very last letter the comprehensive programme they had drawn up for Basil's benefit, and he enjoyed himself and them, and they enjoyed him, immensely. Their intercourse was of the frankest, and they were almost as much at ease with one another as in the old days at Montalta. For both girls were engaged, the one to Lord Rollo Deolynn, brother of the young Duke of Cheshire, and the other to George Ellesmere, brother of Basil's old schoolfellow, and who had been in his own form at Eton.

The caïquejes of Khassim Pasha and the Galata Bridge fought for the honour and profit of their custom, and marvelled jubilantly at their barefaced enjoyment of life, which seemed to them to border close on madness, and at the inexhaustible wealth which never haggled about piastres, but paid the fraudulent first price asked without ever a word of questioning. For a full week the caïquejes revelled in a silver harvest, and when Basil left, a shadow fell on Khassim Pasha and Mehmet Ali Pasha Han—the shadow of a great regret at lost opportunities; for every man knew that if he had asked double what he had done, the mad Giaour would have paid it without a word. But something happened before Basil left, and this is how it came about.

On the second Friday the three of them set off from the landing-place by Dolmah Baghcheh in a yacht's gig, which Macleod had managed to borrow from a friend, to row up the Bosphorus to the Sweet Waters of Asia, where the aristocracy were in the habit of holding a kind of church parade in the afternoon.

They started early, carried their own provisions with them, and intended to make a long day of it, and return by moonlight.

To the intense amazement of the lightly-veiled ladies in the lazy caïques, and the amusement of the gentlemen, the two girls handled the sculls, and handled them deftly and well, while Master Basil lolled in the stern and toyed with the steering-ropes. It was as much as they could do to keep from open laughter at the effect their swift and silent passage brought upon boat after boat in the endless procession, all toiling slowly and lazily towards the same objective point.

The procedure and the result were the same in every case. The light gig crept up behind the laden boat, skimmed up level with it, the ladies on the

cushions in the bottom of the caïque caught sight of the strange craft, and the still more extraordinary method of its propulsion; they gave a united gasp of startled astonishment, they sank into a state of shocked surprise which lasted fully half a minute, and then their tongues began going at the rate of sixteen to the dozen, and the harems had food for conversation for a week to come.

It was a glorious day, and the girls thoroughly enjoyed their four-mile pull and the chorus of wondering comment they excited, and they had scarcely turned a hair by the time they rounded the point into Bebek Bay. There they landed and climbed the hill for the view from the crest by the monastery; then to boat again, past the cellar boat-houses of Rumeli Hissar, and straight across stream to the four round towers of Anadoli, the girls still insisting on rowing, for the simple pleasure of exciting the envious admiration of their yashmaked and unemancipated sisters.

This they enjoyed to the full as they made their way through the crowding throng of caïques to the shore, and, with Reigne's assistance, drew the gig well up on the beach. Then they gathered up their provisions and strolled away unconcernedly under the hypnotizing gaze of a hundred pairs of bright black eyes, which in solemn silence watched their every movement from behind the sheltering veils.

They spent a white-stone day in and about the beautiful valley of the Sweet Waters. They wandered along the banks of the stream, they climbed the hill-sides, they rested under the cypress trees, they ate and drank and smoked—that is, Basil did—and made merry, and all day long they followed the bent of their own sweet wills, and, without any ostentatious or prying observation, they managed to show Basil many a curious little inside glimpse into the manners and customs of better-class Turkish society.

From the Battery Hill above Kandili they saw the sun go down behind a glorified Stambul, and they lingered on till the last caïque had laboured slowly away with its freight of quasi-hidden beauty, and the last tinkle of the last mandoline had died away into the universal stillness, and only the melancholy rustle of the cypresses was to be heard. Then the moon rose over Rumeli Hissar, and reluctantly they got afloat again, and pushed off into the pathway of shimmering steel which the moonlight cast on the troubled waters, and floated quietly down towards the City of the Seven Hills. Houses, palaces, and mosques glimmered out ghostly white against the dark soft background of the hills and feathery woods. The sky was filled with a nebulous effulgent haze. Everything whispered peace, and even matter-of-fact Elaine grew a trifle sentimental, thinking, no doubt, of the absent Rollo ; and Basil Reigne's thoughts were full of dark-eyed Marie Obdanovitch, and somehow the sparkling life of the moonlit waters brought her very vividly to his mind.

They were drifting thus quietly along, and had just passed Kuru Chesmeh. A passing cloud veiled the brightness of the moonlight, and they were about half a mile from the shore, when they noticed a caïque coming rapidly along towards them out of the shadow of the land. The two men in her were rowing hard, and the creak of the oars reached them before they caught sight of the boat itself. It was a big, heavy, four-oared boat, but the two stalwart rowers bent their backs and drove her through the water at a good pace.

They seemed coming straight for the gig. There was something venomous and startling in that swift silent oncoming. The raised prow of the caïque zig-zagging with the lusty strokes of the oarsmen threatened them like a serpent's head. Their course was so straight for the gig that Basil sprang up.

'Now, then, you blundering idiots, where are you coming to?' he shouted.

And in a moment it was on them. The snaking prow crashed through the side of the gig, and the water came pouring in. But the oarsmen drove on in grim silence. The heavier boat crushed down the smaller and walked right over it, and in a moment they were all in the water gasping and choking with the suddenness of their overturn.

Reigne's hot words were quenched by a throatful of Bosphorus water. As he came up he found the oars of the gig floating near him. The girls came up one after another a few yards away.

He shoved an oar under each of their arms, and gasped hoarsely, 'Can you swim?'

'Yes,' said Elaine. 'We 're all right.'

'Then strike for the shore. I 'll follow,' and he turned, and boiling with anger at the outrage, struck out with great whirling side-strokes after the caïque. She was some distance away, and he saw that he would have no chance of catching up with her. He would dearly have liked to be on board of her just for the space of two minutes.

He was about giving up the chase as hopeless when, to his surprise, the men stopped rowing. He set his teeth and thrashed after them, and presently came within arm's length of the boat.

'You cursed blackguards,' he panted, and reached up a hand to the gunwale.

The nearer rower let go his oar and knelt down and bent over towards him, and Basil caught the sudden gleam of steel as he struck at him over the side. In an instant Reigne dropped his whole weight under the boat with all the jerk he could put into it, wondering how it would fare with his fingers up above. It was not fingers, however, that the ruffian was after, but the sudden jerk upset his intentions and himself, and in a moment he came headlong into

the water. Before the water was out of his eyes, Basil's fist came down between them, and he rolled away downstream, his face fading below the water like a piece of white paper.

The other in the boat had unshipped his oar, and stood in act of poising it for a blow at Basil's head, but another sudden jerk of the crank boat brought him overboard too, and as soon as he rose he struck out vigorously for the shore.

Basil followed, and easily came up with him. The result of his first smashing blow had rather appalled him, so, contenting himself with a heavy banging about the head, during which he received a kick in the stomach which took away what little wind he had left, he let the rascal go, and presently swam slowly back to the caïque. He made another excursion for the floating oars, and shoved them into the boat, and essayed to scramble in himself.

Now the boarding of a caïque, even from above in the usual way, is at all times a matter requiring delicate judgment and careful stepping. To get into one from water level is a matter of extremest difficulty.

Basil tried to climb in as he would into an ordinary boat, and the ticklish craft heeled over on its beam-ends and began to take in water. He thought the matter over, and then travelled slowly, hand over hand, to the stern quarter, tried his weight on it there, and found himself fairly well balanced by the forward part of the boat. Bit by bit he drew himself up till he got his chin on to the gunwale, and so obtained a moment's easement of his muscles. Then up again till his chest came level with his hands. Another heave and a mighty upflinging of his heels, and he tumbled headlong into the boat. Then, panting, and with muscles all a-quiver—for the strain had been a mighty one—he fitted the second pair of oars, and standing with his face to the bows, pulled in the direction of the swimming girls.

He came up with them kicking slowly along in the direction of the shore.

'Now, young ladies, here we are. Who shall I take in first?'

'Take Eny. She 's getting pumped,' said Elaine.

'Now, then, Lady Enid,' he said, bending over her. 'Give me your hands and let 's try. They 're mighty shoogly things to get into, are caïques. Yes, we may as well take the sculls. Now then, one, two, three! Heave ho!'

It had been hard work getting on board himself. It was harder still getting the girls in. They were tall, well-built maidens, and their wet clothing added fifty per cent. to their weight. However, it had to be done. He got Lady Enid round astern, and hauled her up inch by inch, balancing the boat as best he could till she could support herself, half in and half out of the water, by the gunwale. Then, with one hand gripping the other side of the boat with bloodless fingers, he got the other arm under her arms and succeeded in dragging her inboard. Lady Elaine he got in in the same way, and after a minute's panting rest, he gave them each an oar while he took two of the gig's sculls, and they pulled rapidly for Dolmah Baghcheh.

'It will do you more good pulling than sitting still in your wet things,' he said; and they pulled with a will.

'What did they do it for?' asked Lady Elaine.

'I don't know,' he replied. 'Maybe they were drunk. I 'm afraid one of them won't get drunk again, anyhow. He drew a knife on me, and I hit him between the eyes, and he went under, but I was mad and didn't stop to think what the effect might be. The other fellow I just banged about the head.'

'You did quite right,' said Elaine. 'I believe they did it on purpose.'

'It looked like it, but I can't imagine why.'

They landed at the stage below the German Embassy, and left the captured caïque in charge of a boatman there for future inquiries, and offered him fifty piastres if he succeeded in bringing in the damaged gig. Then they set off home by way of the Champs des Morts and Taxim Square, preferring to walk rather than to ride, even if a carriage could have been found.

As it turned out, none of them was much the worse for the accident.

But over the after-dinner cigars that night Lord Caerleon asked—

'How did this matter come about, Reigne? The girls chatter so much that it is not easy to know exactly what 's what. It was purely an accident, I suppose?'

Reigne smoked in silence for a minute, and then said quietly—

'I 'm inclined to think it was no accident, but a deliberate attempt to down us and drown us, or perhaps I should say, me.'

'That is a serious thing to say, my boy,' and his lordship looked startled.

'I know it, my Lord, and it is only very reluctantly that I say it.'

'But what makes you think it, my boy?'

'I 'll tell you, Lord Caerleon. I 've about come to the conclusion that this is the second time since I left Vienna that an attempt has been made on my life.'

'Good heavens, my dear boy! What makes you think such a horrible thing as that?' and his lordship's cigar spent its fragrance in mid-air, and he eyed his young friend anxiously, scenting the possibilities of undesirable complications.

'Well, I 'll tell you,' said Reigne slowly. 'I had no intention of speaking of it, and I would not mention it now, but that these two things taken together seem to me to point possibly to something

more than mere accident. As we came over the Balkans, just as the train crawled up to the saddle, the bunk where I ought to have been sleeping was raked fore and aft by a volley of rifle bullets which came through the windows.'

'Good God! And where were you?'

'I had fallen asleep in the smoking-car fortunately, or I should have had a good dozen bullets in me from feet to head'—the old Earl's face stiffened into an ominous frown—'and the most curious part of the affair was this—the window of my compartment had been marked with a white gummed ticket stuck on the glass. The piece of glass with the ticket still on it was found on the bed, and the bed was ploughed to pieces with bullets.'

His Excellency put his cigar into his mouth, and scratched his jaw with his first finger, his face all puckered up with anxious puzzlement.

'That is a pretty serious matter,' he said slowly.

'Still, taken by itself, I should have thought those bullets might have been intended for some other person of more distinction than myself, but, taking this matter of the boat in conjunction with the other, it looks, as you say, serious. Those two rascals meant to drown us. They were not drunk, and they meant business.'

'But what in Heaven's name is the meaning of it all, my boy?'

'I don't know. As far as I know I 'm at peace with all the world. Of course,' he added musingly, 'there was that affair with Polopof at St. Petersburg, but I can't see any connection between Polopof and these matters. He was a pretty bad lot, and he got no more than he deserved, but I hardly see how he comes in here.'

'It is a mighty curious coincidence anyhow,' said His Excellency. 'By the way, we 've cornered your man Chakri at last. He 's at his shooting-box in

the Dospod Daghs, and will be there for the next three or four days.'

'Then I must be off at once.'

'To-morrow morning will do all right. You need a good night's rest after your upset. If there is anything in what you think, I really doubt if it 's safe for you to go up there all alone. It 's about the very wildest part of the country.'

'Whereabouts is it, and how do I get there?'

'The Dospod Daghs?—same as the Rhodopes, you know. You 'll train to Kouleli-Bourgas, and then come down by the other line to Yenideli, and there you 'll have to get a horse and ride thirty miles or so up into the hills. Didn't I hear you say you were going to join a party in the Rhodopes when you had finished this business?'

'Yes, Count Szarvas at Vilova.'

'Well, that 's all right. Vilova is on the other side of the hills about twenty miles from Chakri's place, so when you 're through with the Pasha get him to furnish you with an escort to see you safely across. Don't be a fool now and start out alone, and then have to apply to me to bail you out. That troublesome devil, Constantine, is out on the hills again, and scarce a day passes but he nails some one or other. They are just crazy mad about him here, and they seem absolutely helpless in the matter of catching him. I really doubt,' he said again musingly, 'whether it is safe for you to go, especially after what you 've just been telling me.'

'Pooh! I 'll manage all right. I 'll buy a revolver, or you can lend me one. I don't as a rule carry anything of that kind. I 'll be as right as a trivet.'

'Well, I hope so. It is a wild part,' and His Excellency looked worried and troubled, 'and life out there is about as cheap as dirt. But once you reach Chakri's place you 'll be all right, as he will know he 'll be held answerable for you.'

CHAPTER XIV

THE ASSISTANCE OF ANNA ANGELIDES

BEFORE he started in the morning Basil had the satisfaction of hearing that old Ali, the boatman at the landing-stage, had succeeded in salving the gig just as it was drifting out into the Sea of Marmora, and Lord Caerleon undertook to prosecute inquiries as to the ownership of the caïque, though he had very little hope of arriving at any definite result, as it was probably only hired for the occasion at one of the waterside villages.

His Excellency lent Basil his own revolver, and the young man hurried it shamefacedly into his hip-pocket, as though the very possession of it were an indication of timidity.

Early as it was, the girls and their father accompanied him to the station, and with many last precautionary counsels from the one, and many waving and beaming farewells from the others, he started on his further quest of Chakri Pasha.

As Lord Caerleon expressively said, it was a brutally slow journey. The train was thoroughly Turkish in its ways. It stopped wherever and whenever it could find the slightest pretext—at every station as a matter of course, and in between stations as often as possible, apparently for a nibble of grass or a piece of coal or a drink of water, or at times, as far as Basil could make out, for absolutely no reason whatever save sheer national laziness. He got through the day somehow, and was rejoiced when, just as night was falling, the ramshackle roofs and the domes and minarets of Kouleli-Bourgas hove in sight, and the creaking train rumbled exhaustedly into the station and released him from captivity.

He would have enjoyed a five-mile tramp to get the creases out of his long legs, but that was inadvisable, and in view of his early start next morning he decided to get a room at the nearest inn and turn in at once as soon as he had had something to eat.

Fortunately there was a small hotel not far from the station. The station-master spoke a few words of French and pointed it out to him. He fell over seven separate dogs on his way there, but they only growled remonstratively and flopped down in another place, from which he judged that they were accustomed to being fallen over and knew better than to resent it actively.

He was well received at the small hotel, and within their extreme limitations they did what they could to make him comfortable. They gave him a plentiful meal of pilaf and chicken, and olives, and cheese, and bread and honey, and very good coffee, and made him up a bed in the best room of the house. But when he had supped and smoked and thought of turning in, a remembered hint of His Excellency's, anent wood-lined rooms in Turkish inns, led him to examine his couch with care. And as the result of his inspection he decided that the wooden dais near the fireplace, and frequent changes of position, would probably be more conducive to bodily comfort than the occupancy of the already much-occupied bed.

It was not a very restful night, but it passed, and with the first streak of dawn coffee and bread and honey were brought in, and half an hour later the lazy train dawdled out of the station. And Reigne, comfortably spread over the seats of the smoking-carriage, fell fast asleep, and woke only when the blue waves of the Ægean were flashing outside, and the train was crawling into Dedeagh.

A somewhat scrambling breakfast, and then on board again for the four hours' journey to Yenideli.

It was high noon by the time they got there, and

Basil was thankful to have seen the last of the train. Yenideli was prettily situated at the head of a long blue arm of the sea, but it was not much of a place, and seemed mostly given up to fish, and he wondered if it would run to a horse.

However, the station-master turned out to be a Levantine Greek, who understood a word or two of English and spoke French fairly well. He entered into Basil's affairs with gusto, and when he heard his plans, and that he required a horse to get out to Teraklia to see Chakri Pasha, he assured him that there would be no difficulty. He would introduce His Excellency to the Greek merchant, Alexander Angelides, who had business relations with the Pasha, and without doubt he would further His Excellency's wishes, and fulfil all his requirements. Now that the train had started he had no further duties for the moment, and if it pleased His Excellency they would proceed at once to the merchant's house.

His Excellency was more than pleased to have fallen so pleasantly, and expressed his ardent desire to make the merchant's acquaintance with as little delay as possible.

The house, solidly built of blocks of white stone, stood on the hillside a little way out of the town, and it shone like a beacon in the glare of the noonday sun.

They were ushered into a large cool room, furnished in European style with tables and chairs, and the station-master, sitting gingerly on the edge of his unaccustomed seat, whispered to Basil, ' You see ? He is rich—rich beyond dreams,'—and he cast up his eyes to express the limitless wealth of the great man, —' but a hard man at a bargain, a very hard man at a bargain,' and he nodded his head sagely, as one who knew it of his own experience.

The door opened presently, and instead of the merchant there entered the merchant's daughter, a

handsome, dark-eyed girl of nineteen or twenty. She bowed as they rose, and looked at them inquiringly.

'They told me, Adam Annapoulo, that you had brought a stranger to see my father,' she said in Greek. 'He is away in the country and will not be back till night. Can I be of any service to you or to your friend?'

'His Excellency is English,'—the girl's dark eyes brightened hospitably,—'he desires to get to Teraklia on urgent business with the Pasha. It was in my mind that your father would be willing to further his wishes. His Excellency's pressing need is for a horse.'

The girl turned to Basil, and said pleasantly in French—

'My father, I am sure, will regret missing the pleasure of meeting you. We love the English. I am sure he would wish me to do all in our power to assist you, both for your own sake and for His Excellency the Pasha's, who is very friendly with us.'

Her cheek flushed slightly as she spoke of Chakri, and Basil wondered amusedly if this high-spirited girl could possibly be unaware of the Pasha's already much-married state.

'Mademoiselle has been in Paris?' he said; 'perhaps in England also?'

'No,' she said, smiling. 'I was at school in Athens, and got my French there. They taught us English, but it did not come easily to me. I read it still, but the pronunciation is difficult to me.'

'I am very greatly obliged to you, Mademoiselle, and if you can let me have any kind of a horse I shall be very grateful, as I am anxious to catch the Pasha before he leaves.'

'He will remain at Teraklia still three days,' she said in the tone of one who knew.

'I have been waiting in Constantinople for a week to learn definitely of his whereabouts, and only

learned the day before yesterday that he was there. He is a difficult man to catch, apparently.'

'Yes,' she laughed, with the touch of colour in her cheeks again; 'His Excellency is a great traveller, and never stops long in one place. Did you think of going on to-day, Monsieur?'

'Yes, I 'm afraid I must get on at once, that is, if it does not inconvenience you to provide me with a horse.'

'But you will return and see my father on your way back?'

'I fear I shall not have that pleasure,' he said. 'When my business is finished with the Pasha I go across the hills to Vilova to join a shooting-party there.'

'Oh, I am sorry, and my father, too, will regret not seeing you. He is much interested in the English. He has been to Egypt and several times to Cyprus.'

'You will eat before you start,' she said presently. 'I will order luncheon. And you, Adam Annapoulo, you will stop also. If you start by three o'clock,' she said, turning to Basil, 'it will give you plenty of time without hard riding. And you will be there before dark, which is advisable, for those brigands have been troublesome again lately.'

'They are devils,' said the station-master sententiously. 'I expect they will come down and capture one of my trains one of these days.'

'I shouldn't wonder,' laughed the girl. 'Then you will only have three trains a day to attend to instead of four. It will be quite like a holiday for you.'

'When you come to England, Monsieur le Chef de Gare,' said Basil, with a smile, 'I shall take you to a station where five hundred trains a day pass through.'

He was not quite sure of his figures, but risked it.

The station-master sat with his mouth wide open and finally gasped, 'God in heaven!' and spoke no more, but looked occasionally at Basil, between

amazement at his statement and doubts as to his veracity.

'I will give orders about a horse for you,' said Anna Angelides, and left the room after providing them with cigars and cigarettes and begging them to make use of them, to which invitation Basil responded gladly, but the station-master did not. Luncheon was served almost immediately, and to Basil it was a most enjoyable meal, while Adam Annapoulo, contrasting it with his ordinary frugal fare at home, sighed internally at the unequal distribution of the good things of life, but did not permit that consideration to hinder him from making famous play with the unusual delicacies in front of him.

Basil chatted gaily with his charming hostess about Vienna and Constantinople, and Paris and London, and found himself so very pleasantly situated that he really regretted that his conscience would not permit him to dally an hour longer than was necessary in such delightful surroundings.

He was describing his observation of the Selamlik, which he had witnessed the previous week, when Adam Annapoulo suddenly asked—

'And do they never get all mixed up and go to smash, Excellency?'

'I beg your pardon?' said Basil, thinking he referred to the Sultan's guards and the spectators.

'Those trains of yours—five hundred a day——'

'Oh no, never! Accidents are rare with us, and I don't think there has ever been one yet at the station I am thinking of.'

'I would sit for a week and watch them go past,' he said, and sank again into a state of profound amazement, which however did not affect his appetite.

It was only when cigars and coffee came in that he suddenly awoke to a sense of transgression, and mournfully declined them.

'It is Ramazan,' he murmured regretfully.

At which Anna Angelides laughed out.

'But we are not Mussulmans here.'

'I am—supposed to be, down there,' and he jerked his head in the direction of the village.

'Ah, I forgot,' said Anna, smiling mischievously.

'So did I,' said the station-master gloomily.

'Oh, well, it 's rather late to remember it now,' she laughed again; 'better finish off properly. I won't tell, and you can fast all night to make up for it.'

'It is true,' he said; and when the servant had left the room, he lit a cigar with extreme relish, and sipped his coffee with all the enjoyment of stolen waters.

Then the French clock struck three, and a servant announced that His Excellency's horse was ready.

With many expressions of regret at his inability to stop, and warmest thanks for all her kindness, and very clear directions from her as to his route, and instructions to leave the horse in the Pasha's care—the latter accompanied by a twinkle of the bright eyes and a delicate flushing of the cheek again—he kissed his hostess's hand, and mounted and rode away.

CHAPTER XV

ONE RESULT OF SEVASTOPOL

IT was a strong, sinewy little mare they had provided for him, of no very fine breed he judged, but excellent in her paces, and more comfortable for a thirty-mile ride than a more showy and mettlesome steed might have proved.

Her favourite pace, he found, was an easy canter, and she seemed capable of keeping this up all day long. He wondered if this was the beautiful Anna's own palfrey.

The sun was still very hot as he slowly climbed the long, white road which wound up the valley from

the head of the bay, and when he reached the top he halted, to breathe the mare and to take a last look at the blue Ægean sparkling in the distance. Then he turned, put the mare to her pace again, and rode in the direction of the mountains, somewhere on the other side of which were Vilova and Marie Obdanovitch, and his heart leaped at the thought that every stride of his gallant little steed brought him that much nearer to his princess.

The one feature of the country that struck Reigne most was its extreme solitude. Here and there, during the first mile or two, he saw women bending at their work in the fields, but after the first half-hour he found himself absolutely, almost startlingly alone. The wide, open country lay all around him, and right ahead lay the blue line of the Rhodopes, but of humanity not a sign, and not a sound to break the monotonous silence save the regular beat of the mare's hoofs on the stony uneven road.

It was therefore with a feeling of surprise, and almost of relief—for utter desolation has an element of discomfort in it—that he spied, on the road in front, a solitary pedestrian tramping in the direction of the hills.

As the distance between them shortened, Reigne saw that he was dressed in the baggy white Albanian breeches and ragged blue jacket and cloth cap, the sight of which had of late grown so familiar to him.

He drew rein as they came level, and essayed to inquire, in the few words of Turkish he had mastered, if he was on the right road for Teraklia. The man glanced up sideways at him, like a bad-tempered cur expecting a kick, growled a word or two which Basil could not understand, and waved his hand towards the hills in front.

Then he dropped his chin and trudged doggedly on. For an instant there seemed something familiar

in the truculent white gleam of the malevolent eyes and the ferocious droop of the sweeping black moustache. But whoever and whatever he was, he did not seem in a companionable frame of mind, nor did he appear a particularly desirable associate, so Reigne shook up his horse and left the fellow to his evil humours.

But he could not free himself from the idea that he had seen the man before somewhere, though, try as he would, he could not place him. And finally, saying to himself that this ruffian was the exact copy of a hundred other exactly similar ruffians about Stambul, and that it was the type, and not any individual ruffian, which this one reminded him of, he dropped him out of his thoughts, and sent them flying pleasantly over the hills after his heart.

But he had not gone a mile when a tinkle of metal rang among the hoof-beats, the little mare suddenly broke in her easy stride, and after a stumbling step or two fell into a limping walk, and came at last to a dead stop.

Reigne leaped down, and found, as he expected, a shoe gone, and not knowing what the facilities might be for getting new ones in that desolate district, he thought well to go back in search of it. There was no difficulty in finding it, and he stood dangling it in his fingers, with the reins hooked over his shoulder, and the mare gingerly resting the point of her naked hind hoof on the ground, when the truculent individual in the Albanian breeches came along.

He was for passing them with nothing more than a currish glance from the corner of his eye, but Basil hailed him in English—'Hey! Where can I find a blacksmith?' and swung the glittering shoe in front of him by way of translation. The sinister one might not understand the words, but he could not pretend not to understand the situation. He half turned to Reigne, muttered a few words, and waved his hand

again in the direction he was going, then turned and went stolidly on his way, leaving Basil to make what he could of it, and to follow or not as he chose.

Whether there really was a blacksmith or not on ahead Basil could not tell, but there might be. So he heartened the mare with cheerful words and a pat on the neck and a caress on the nose, and led her gently forward in the wake of the gentleman in the baggy breeches. And again there came into his mind the uncomfortable, puzzling impression that, after all, it was not the type but this actual and particular specimen of Stambul loafer with whom he was somehow acquainted, though how, when, and where that acquaintance had come about he could not for the life of him remember.

Two legs, however, although they had already covered twenty miles, got along faster than five legs and a half, and the man in the white breeches had disappeared over a ridge in front before Basil and the mare were half-way up to it. When they topped it the man was nowhere to be seen, but down below them in a hollow, through which wound a streamlet, lay a village, with a tiny mosque and a minaret like a tall candle with the extinguisher on, and a blue haze of fragrant wood smoke came curling up towards them. The mare sniffed and pricked up her ears, and limped joyfully downwards; and Basil pressed on, hopeful of finding there some one capable of putting his horse together again.

His mind was soon at ease on that point. He heard the cheerful, lazy clink-clink of hammer on anvil before he saw whence the sound came, and the mare heard it too, and turned of her own accord in the right direction.

The smith and his boy, in a state of dilapidated deshabille, were tinkering at an antiquated plough with extreme and thoughtful deliberation, when Reigne and his mare appeared suddenly in the open-

ing of their shed. They knocked off work and regarded him with wondering eyes, and in the old man's a flash of something else.

'Can you put this shoe on for me?' said Basil, and he held it out towards them.

'Yes, yes,' said the smith, smiling broadly through his grizzled moustache; 'yes, sare! dammog!' and he drew himself up and saluted military fashion.

'Ah, you speak English?' said Basil. 'That is good.'

'Yes, sare, yes! Dammog! Sevastopol!' And he thumped his broad chest to emphasize the fact that he had been there.

'You were in the Crimea?'

'Yes, sare, yes! Dammog!'

'Then I am sure you can put this shoe on for me, and then we 'll have a smoke and a chat,' and he handed him the shoe, and lit a cigar and sat down on the plough. He put another cigar down in an elbow of it, pointing first to the shoe and then to the cigar, and nodding towards the smith.

'Yes, yes, dammog, sare, yes!' and the old fellow bustled about as he probably had not done since those jovial, heartbreaking days in the trenches before Sevastopol. He looked at the shoe critically, then cast a knowing look over the mare, then pointed first to the shoe and then to himself, and nodded and smiled.

'You put it on?' said Reigne. 'Well, you ought to put 'em on so they won't come off.'

'Yes, sare, dammog, yes!' and he shoved it in among the glowing ashes, and the small boy juggled with the bellows without ever taking his beady eyes off the wonderful stranger.

Silence then for a few minutes while the shoe was trimmed up into better shape, and the hoof carefully cleaned out, the mare affectionately nuzzling the smith as an old acquaintance the while, and then

with a parting slap on her glossy flank the old soldier came to claim his reward.

He accepted the cigar with a graceful salaam, took a humorous squint outside at the declining sun, and picked out a piece of glowing charcoal with his fingers to light up by, but when Basil drew out money and offered it to him, he smiled pleasantly and shook his head, and said, 'Dammog, sare, dammog!'

Reigne, however, tossed the small boy the few ten and twenty paras pieces he found in his pocket, and the small boy went for them like a monkey at a handful of nuts. Then, placing a twenty-piastre piece on the anvil, Basil turned again to the smith, who smiled beneficently, but shook his head, and said, 'Dammog, sare, dammog!'

The mare was trying her refitted shoe with a wholesome feeling of satisfaction, and Basil and the smith were just laughingly warming to their conversation, when a tumult of approaching voices broke upon them, and they stopped short, and sat looking in the direction whence the sounds came.

Presently there hove in sight a tattered rabble of village folk, armed with sticks and reaping-hooks and other hastily snatched homely weapons, and at sight of them heading for the shed the smith put his cigar carefully on one side and stood up and gripped his biggest hammer, while Basil sat quietly smoking on the handle of the plough, and wondered what the noisy beggars were up to, and supposed it was some religious ceremony and one of the rites of Ramazan.

The wave of ragged humanity swept noisily up to the shed, and welled tumultuously around it.

The smith spoke angrily to them, and they howled excitedly back at him, and as Basil contemplated them quietly through the smoke of his cigar, it began to dawn upon him that it was he himself who was the centre and object of their undesirable atten-

tions. And as the wordy warfare between the crowd and the smith grew more and more impassioned, he translated it in his own mind something after this fashion :—

Smith. 'Now, then, you noisy demons, what 's all this row about ? '

Mob. 'We want that man—the Giaour—that 's sitting on your plough, Hussein.'

Smith. 'Indeed ! and what may you want with him, pray ? He 's a friend of mine.'

Mob. 'He 's a Giaour, and an enemy of the Pādishah, and a subverter of Islām.'

Smith. 'Rot ! He 's an Englishman, and a personal friend of the Pādishah's. He was with me at Sevastopol. He saved my life there.'

Mob. 'He 's deceiving you. We want to skin him alive and roast him dead.'

Smith. 'And who in the name of the Prophet has put you up to all this tomfoolery ? '

Mob. 'Ahmed there is just from Stambul. The Giaour tried to kill the Pādishah. Ahmed will tell you.' And they hustled Ahmed from the back, where he had been skulking, to a central place in the front rank.

Ahmed was the gentleman of the baggy breeches and the truculent face. He had possessed himself of a long-barrelled carbine, and there was blood in his eye. He launched into a torrent of angry words, and gesticulated vehemently. He pointed to his own face, and in a flash it came upon Basil who he probably was, and with mingled feelings of relief and regret he got up from the plough and stood beside the smith. For he gathered, from what passed and the condition of his face, that Ahmed was one of the two rascals who had run down the gig with the caïque that other night on the Bosphorus—the one who had tried to stab him over the side of the boat, and whom he believed he had killed when he struck

him between the eyes and sank him. As he looked at the sinister face, all twisted with passion and still bearing the marks of his blow, the faint relief he had felt died in him and only the regrets remained. For if ever a man meant mischief this man did.

He was working himself and the others into frenzy, and the smith began to show signs of uneasiness.

It struck Reigne that it was time to think of moving. He threw away his cigar and slipped his arm through the mare's rein. The smith's boy jumped for the cigar, tucked his heels under him, and gave himself up to the divided enjoyment of an unusually good smoke and the unusually jolly row going on outside.

Hussein the smith turned to Basil and spoke rapidly in Turkish, to which the Englishman replied with a shake of the head, as he had not the remotest idea what the other was talking about.

The smith, however, turned triumphantly on the crowd and evidently said, 'There, I told you so! Ahmed is a liar and is making fools of you all.'

But the crowd yelled and roared, and hungered for the Giaour's skin and the smell of his roasting flesh, and Ahmed, emboldened by the noisy numbers behind him, levelled his gun at Reigne. And Reigne, seeing that his time was come, either for better or for worse, clicked to the terrified mare, and sprang straight at the would-be shooter. He knocked the gun up with his arm, and for the second time brought his fist down fair and square on Ahmed's scowling face. The gun went off, and Ahmed went down, and as the crowd fell back for a moment, not knowing who was shot, Reigne threw himself on to the mare's back and dug his heels into her sides. She leaped and snorted and overthrew half a dozen of the crowd. The rest, recovering their wits, struck wildly at horse and rider, and hit only one another, and in another moment Basil was free of them and galloping

down the road for dear life. They streamed after him in a ragged, howling tail, the mare's hoofs rattled on the wooden bridge like a kettle-drum, some one tried a snapshot at him from the roof of a house ; he waved his hand derisively, and was gone over the opposite ridge.

It was a close fit, and Basil wondered to himself how that ruffian Ahmed had managed to turn up so inopportunely. If he had tracked him purposely he could not have done it much better. However, he was free of him at last, and now to find Teraklia and Chakri Pasha.

Anna Angelides had told him to take any path he could find when he neared the hills, keep them on the right, and ride straight on till he saw a square white building standing on a platform on the hillside. Following these directions he turned off to the left as soon as the plain began to rise towards the hills, and rode on rapidly, mile after mile, with his eyes intently searching their rugged sides for anything which might answer the description given him of Chakri's house.

CHAPTER XVI

CHAKRI CHEZ LUI

THE hills were already darkening with a plum-coloured bloom as he rode rapidly along towards the west.

The prospect of being overtaken by night before he discovered Chakri's dwelling-place was anything but a pleasant one, so he put the mare to her best pace, leaving the choice of ground to herself and trusting to her sure-footedness, while he kept a keen look-out for the big white building which Anna Angelides had told him he could not by any possibility miss.

It was with a distinct feeling of relief that he saw it at last in the distance, standing out sharp and square from the smoother contours of the hills, and silhouetted against a lingering band of orange in the western sky. By daylight assuredly it would have been as impossible to miss Teraklia as to overlook a lighthouse on a flat coast on a clear day.

Gaunt, flat, bare, white, and almost windowless—a very barracks of a house—it struck Basil as about the most forbidding and inhospitable dwelling-place he had ever come across.

He rode slowly up the rocky road to the plateau and knocked on a massive wooden gate under an archway. A small panel slid back at last and a harsh voice uttered some words in Turkish, asking, he supposed, who he was and what the Prophet he wanted.

'I have letters for the Pasha,' said Basil in French.

A hand came questioningly through the small square hole, and in it he deposited his letters from Lord Caerleon and Count Szarvas, and his own card, and waited patiently perforce for full five minutes, while the mare, finding the air uncomfortably cool after her rapid course, pawed up the stones and snorted with disgust. Then, slowly, one valve of the great gates swung back, and he rode into the semi-darkness of the archway.

It was a tunnel like a railway arch, and was dimly lighted by a couple of flickering lamps of varicoloured glass. A black man of massive proportions swung the gate to behind him and silently adjusted the bars, while his double, in equal silence, took Basil's mare by the bridle and led her through the tunnel into the great courtyard.

The courtyard was of very great extent, and the building enclosed it on all sides, and here on the right was a large and carefully tended garden, with smooth green sward and trees and flowers and

fountains, on to which the latticed windows of the residential portion of the house looked out.

Lights glowed in many of the windows, and fell in golden shafts on the shadowy greenery below. Moving forms flitted about behind the lattices, and the scene within the great white barracks, as compared with its outward aspect, was as life is to death.

The groom halted at a trellised gateway leading into the gardens, and as Basil dismounted, another stately negro issued from an adjacent door, and with profound salaams begged his lordship, in quite understandable French, to give himself the pleasure of following him.

Basil followed him into the building, across a wide corridor, up a flight of steps covered with soft matting, and down a long passage. The right-hand side of this was the outer wall of the building, through narrow glazed slits in which he caught passing glimpses of the country outside, while on the left-hand side they passed a long succession of doors leading into the rooms which looked out on to the quadrangle. The doors were numbered like those of an hotel, and Basil remembered that the building had formerly been either a monastery or a nunnery.

His guide pushed open the door of room No. 40, and stood aside for him to enter. It was a spacious apartment, and Basil wondered at the luxurious quarters of the former inmates. Then he saw, from the fact of there being three separate doors opening into the corridor, and three separate windows looking out on to the courtyard, that for the making of this guest-chamber three smaller rooms had been knocked into one. It was plainly but sufficiently furnished, and contained a large wicker lounging-chair and several smaller ones, a washstand and a tin bath and an iron bedstead, and a very inviting bed to a man who had been a night without one.

'His Excellency awaits milord's pleasure,' said the black man.

'I will be ready in ten minutes. Can you get me my travelling case?'

'*Voilà*, milord,' as it was handed in at the door. 'I will await milord's pleasure without.'

'That 's all right,' said Basil, as soon as he was alone. 'Now for a wash, and then for His Excellency. I hope he 'll give me something to eat. I am famished, in spite of Miss Angelides's good luncheon.'

When he had groomed himself and felt respectable, he went out into the corridor and found the black awaiting him with his eye at one of the narrow window slits. The man salaamed and led the way back along the passage, and down the stairs, and down the wider corridor on the ground floor to a cosy room with silken hangings, where a cheery wood fire blazed on an open hearth, and a cheerful little table about two feet high squatted in front of a pile of soft cushions, and invited him to sit and eat.

He folded up his long legs and composed himself on the cushions as artistically as he could manage it, and his own special black man served him with a succession of dainty dishes, into the composition of which his mountain-bred appetite would not give him time to inquire, but which he devoured in faith and found unusually good. For drink he had a flask of very excellent Chianti, and he devoutly thanked his stars that they had consigned him to the hands of a man of the world, and not to the tender mercies of a strait-laced Mussulman.

His repast over, the black man stood bowing before him, and indicated his readiness to conduct him to his master.

'That 's all right,' said Basil to himself once more, as he uncoiled his stiffened legs. 'Now I feel fit for the fray. Lead on—Othello.'

CHAPTER XVII

A QUIET LITTLE CHAT WITH THE PASHA

IT was not a long journey this time. Drawing aside one of the silken hangings, the black opened a door in the wall and bowed him through, and he found himself in the presence of his host.

This room, also, was heavily draped with silken curtains. It was softly lighted with dim varicoloured lamps pendent from the roof, and the furniture seemed to consist entirely of piles of silken cushions, and in the centre of one such pile lazily reclined the master of the establishment.

He bowed graciously to his guest, and welcomed him in a few courteous words, and waved him to an adjacent heap of cushions. On these Basil essayed to dispose himself comfortably, and only succeeded in making himself feel ridiculous and immediately at a disadvantage from the awkwardness of his unusual attitude. The room was thick with smoke and heavy with the scent of burning pastilles, and through the partly opened lattice Basil heard the spasmodic splash of the fountains on the stillness outside.

After all he had heard concerning him, he looked curiously at Chakri, but the light was so dim and the smoke so thick that it was not very much he could see.

As far as he could make out, the Pasha seemed a man of about forty with a somewhat swarthy complexion, though that might only be the effect of the cross-lights and shadows in which he sat. His head was covered with a turban of many folds of white gauze swathed round a red fez. His beard was dark and pointed, and his moustache ran down into it. His eyelids drooped as though he were half-asleep or

short-sighted, but, as Reigne soon found, there was not much sleep about them, and they could be keen and sharp enough on occasion. He spoke in French, in a slow pedantic fashion, which might arise from the diffidence of speaking a foreign tongue and an extreme desire to speak it correctly, but which seemed to Basil artificial and assumed, and with all an Englishman's dislike of humbug, he found himself disapproving of his host, and confessed himself somewhat disappointed.

'I am charmed to have the pleasure of a visit from you, Monsieur Reigne,' said the Pasha. 'I had the honour of meeting your father many years ago, before you were in the service, I expect. Is he still alive?'

'Alive and well, I am glad to say, your Excellency, though he has suffered a severe blow lately in the loss of my three brothers, all within a year. I wonder he survived it.'

'That was very sad,' murmured Chakri. 'And you are the last one left?'

'Yes, I am the last.'

'It behoves you then to be careful. To him, at all events, much hangs upon you.'

Here a noiseless attendant brought in coffee and cigars and cigarettes, a newly opened box of each of which he arranged, along with the coffee, on a low table, which he placed by Basil's side.

'I am sorry to have put you to the inconvenience of such a long ride, Monsieur Reigne. How did you manage to find a mount?' asked the Pasha, when the attendant had withdrawn.

'Mademoiselle Angelides at Yenideli was good enough to assist me in that respect, your Excellency.'

'Ah, *la belle* An-na!' said the Pasha, with a gleaming smile. 'And her father?'

'He was away in the country.'

'*A la bonne heure*,' beamed Chakri again, finding

something amusing in the situation which was hidden from Basil. 'And you found your way without difficulty?'

'I found my way, but I can't say without difficulty. I nearly came to loggerheads with some of your countrymen at the half-way village, or perhaps I should say they wanted to come to loggerheads with me.'

'Ah, how was that? And which village?'

'Well, the only one I saw by the road I came—a village between two ridges with a brook between. My horse cast a shoe, and I found an old soldier-smith who put it on. Then a mob came thirsting for my blood. I can't imagine why, as I had not even reached the village itself. The ringleader seemed to be a man whom I think I have met before.'

'And had some dispute with, perhaps?'

'Well, yes, you might put it that way. I was rowing on the Bosphorus with the Ladies Elaine and Enid Caerleon——'

'Ah! The very charming Demoiselles Caerleon!' murmured Chakri again in a tone of retrospective enjoyment.

'—when this man and another ran us down, and sank our boat, and nearly drowned us. I managed to tumble the fellows out of their boat, and bashed in this one's face. I thought I had done for him, but apparently I did not hit hard enough, for he turned up to-day very much alive, and apparently very anxious to make an end of me.'

'They are very fanatical once their race prejudices or religious feelings are aroused. I will have the matter inquired into, and will have them punished.'

'Punish the rascal who tried to shoot me by all means, if you can find him. The rest only did his bidding.'

'They roasted a Jew alive there last week,' said

Chakri contemplatively, 'but I have no doubt he thoroughly deserved it.'

'They seem a nice quiet set of people,' said Basil.

'Oh, they are all right, except now and then, when something upsets them. Then they go a little crazy. You will have to return some other way or they may make things hot for you.'

'Yes, I want to get across the hills to Vilova.'

'Ah, Vilova!'

'Yes, to Count Szarvas's place. He has a shooting-party there and asked me to join it.'

'You know the Count, then, Monsieur Reigne? But, of course, you brought me a letter from him. And the Countess Anna——? You have met her also?'

'Yes; I have had the pleasure of meeting both the Countess and her sister, the Princess Marie——'

'Ah! *La belle, belle* Marie! And is the Princess as beautiful as ever?'

'I have not known her long enough to say, your Excellency, but she is certainly very charming.'

'She is certainly very, very charming,' said Chakri in a slow, rapturous voice, 'and so very, very rich. It is rare that one finds two such noble qualities so perfectly combined. And *la belle Princesse* is still unmarried?'

'So far as I know, your Excellency.'

'*Tiens!* It is curious,' mused the Pasha. 'I have often thought that but for my many other engagements I would make an approach in that quarter myself.'

Reigne's toes tingled, and he blew out a cloud of smoke.

'And now,' said Chakri, after they had cleared the ground, and taken stock of one another, and measured swords, so to speak, 'to what am I indebted for the pleasure of your visit, Monsieur

Reigne? In what way can I be of service to you, or to our very good friend your country?'

'I have come to settle this Slivovitza matter with your Excellency, once for all,' replied Reigne, with a slight emphasis on the 'settle' which caused a smile to flicker round His Excellency's moustache.

'Ah! Slivovitza? Sli—vo—vit—za? Let me see,'—with the air of one carrying so many weighty burdens that reference in special to any one of them needed time and consideration to place it exactly,—'so you have come to settle the Slivovitza matter?'

'Yes, I have come to settle it.'

'And what is the trouble at Slivovitza, Monsieur Reigne?'

If Basil had been quite free to say just exactly what he thought about the matter His Excellency would have heard some very plain Saxon, which would not have lost much of its force even by translation into French. But in business matters the pleasure of saying just what one thinks is frequently denied one from feelings of prudence. He remembered the Duchess of Malplaquet's aphorisms and said quietly—

'Well, your Excellency, in England when we have bought and paid for a thing we have a prejudice in favour of receiving what we have paid for. The gentlemen whose interests I am for the moment representing, at the request of the Foreign Office, have bought and paid for this land at Slivovitza. This extraordinary claim of yours to a prior right, and your assertion that the late owners sold what they had no right to sell, well, you know——' and he ended with a highly expressive shrug.

'*Eh bien, mon ami—continuez!*' drawled Chakri, smiling out of his pile of cushions through his half-closed eyes.

'Well, your Excellency, in a word, it won't do.'

'*Eh bien, mon ami—continuez!*' came again from

the fragrant cloud, of which the Pasha was the source and centre.

'Well, having already paid for the land, we are, of course, not going to pay for it again. We shall now enter into possession, and if your people attempt to obstruct us we shall take possession by force.'

'*Eh bien, mon ami !*—and then ?'

'Well, then, your Excellency can calculate the result as well as we can.'

There came a gleam from the shadowy darkness of the Pasha's mouth, and he nodded.

'And you propose, my friend—— ?'

'I am empowered to make an offer, your Excellency, which I am bound to say, looking at the matter in all its aspects, seems to me quite unnecessarily generous. Our friends are quite convinced of the soundness of their rights. Sooner than relinquish them they are prepared to fight for all they are worth. At the same time they quite recognize the fact that if they are forced to extremes, one or other Government will be bound to step in, and the results may be disastrous all round. They therefore authorize me to offer you, once and for all, the sum of £10,000 in exchange for a full withdrawal of all present and future claims on the property in the terms of a document which I have here. Sign a provisional acceptance of this offer, and the money will be paid into any bank you name, in exchange for the properly executed deed, within ten days.'

'And suppose I decline this not very tempting offer, Monsieur Reigne? What, after all, is £10,000?'

'Then we proceed, and your Excellency must accept the consequences. We may lose the land; your Excellency certainly will. If the attention of the two Governments is called to it by the fact of fighting going on there, they will be bound to act, and when governments step in private interests as a rule suffer. I may even go so far as to say that the

Austrian Government is in full possession of all the facts of the case, and they have informed us definitely that if we cannot settle the matter amicably they will settle it themselves by taking possession on their own account. And, candidly, we would sooner sacrifice our interests to the Austrian Government than feel that we have been '—' done,' he was on the point of saying, and Chakri knew it, and smiled as the Englishman diplomatically switched off into—' deprived of what we consider our rights.'

' How very English ! ' murmured His Excellency.

' No doubt,' said Reigne, as he caught the gleaming smile through the smoke again. ' But, you see, we happen to *be* English, and, anyhow, that is how we feel, and that is what your Excellency has got to reckon with.'

' And suppose, *mon ami*, I were to tell you that my own title-deeds to that very strip of land lie at this present moment in the hands of my bankers at Galata ? '

His eyes were like smouldering sparks as he watched Reigne's face ; but it was quite unmoved, save for a slight sceptical down-curving of the corners of the mouth.

' I should, of course, listen with all due respect to your Excellency's remarks, but they would not alter my opinion as to the exceeding unwisdom of refusing this offer.'

His Excellency grinned again amusedly, and Reigne would dearly have liked to tell him that the English capitalists roundly asserted that the whole matter was a put-up job on his part—they had good reason now to believe that the vendors, from whom they had bought in all good faith, were Chakri's own creatures—and that the wily Turk was simply trying to squeeze out an additional sum for the tract of land for which he had already been handsomely paid.

' Moreover,' said the Pasha, ' I hold that very land

under special grant direct from His Majesty the Sultan.'

'The Austrian Government might question His Majesty's right to give away what does not belong to him.'

'Ah, *mon ami*, that is just where we differ.'

'Yes, your Excellency, and that is just where the whole matter may crack up for all of you.'

'As to whether the Slivovitza territory is in Bosnia or Albania there can be no two opinions,' said Chakri coolly; 'our maps are quite clear on that point.'

'And, pardon me, your Excellency, the maps of the Austrian delimitation survey are just as clear to the contrary.'

'*Eh bien, mon ami*, maps, like women's minds, were made to be altered!'

'Only,' said Reigne daringly, 'maps once made cannot be altered to suit the ideas of private individuals,' and for the first time the Pasha's face darkened into a frown at his exceeding impudence.

But the Englishman lighted another cigar with extremest nonchalance and showed never a sign of the joy that was in him at having, as he said to himself, landed the Pasha one on the nose at last.

Then the wily one started off on another tack, and when Reigne quietly but pointedly showed up the threadbare shabbiness of his argument, he incontinently spun off on still another and yet another line, till his opponent began to get very tired of it all.

There was no nailing the slippery diplomat. He turned, and twisted, and wriggled out of awkward corners in a way that excited Reigne's contemptuous admiration, and came within measurable distance of rousing his feelings into active expression.

He found it at times, indeed, extremely difficult to keep his temper, and it was only the knowledge of

the irrecoverable advantage which his adversary would gain over him if he lost it that enabled him to sit still. More than once he felt that he would cheerfully give half a year's pay to be able to get up and kick the Pasha and his cushions three or four times round the room, and once or twice he was sorely tempted to cast prudence to the winds and do it.

At such times he would veil his feelings behind a cloud of smoke, and mentally use language so undiplomatically scarifying that His Excellency's ears would have tingled redder than his fez if he could have heard it. Then he would emerge from his cloud smiling and cheerful, and slog away again at his point like the British bulldog he was.

He was, of course, very much handicapped by his undiplomatic adherence to facts. Every statement he made could be vouched for by documentary evidence which he had with him. Chakri, on the other hand, calmly and unflinchingly, and without the flicker of an eyelid, did not hesitate to make the most astounding assertions in his own favour, the proofs, or disproofs, of which lay hundreds of miles away. And when, time after time, Reigne, by his documents, showed the extreme—to say the least of it—unlikelihood of some of these wild statements, the Pasha's only reply was a volume of smoke ejected from his nose, and a gleam of white teeth in the shadow of his dark moustache.

CHAPTER XVIII

COFFEE AND SMOKE

THE hours passed. The consumption of coffee and cigars assumed alarming proportions. Reigne felt that he would loathe the smell of coffee for a month.

In the small hours of the morning, in spite of all his efforts, his patience was in shreds and patches, and he was beginning to feel that he could not stand very much more when, looking up from the perusal of a document, by means of which he had just flattened out another of His Excellency's lies, he thought he caught an amused twinkle in the Pasha's eye.

It struck him suddenly that the Turk was having some entertainment at his expense, and the temptation to get up and use him as a football was almost overpowering.

However, he quietly folded up his papers, and said in a tone of finality—

'Very well, your Excellency, I have done my utmost, according to my instructions, to induce you to accept the settlement we suggest. If you have quite made up your mind not to do so, then there is nothing more to be said. We enter into possession, by force if necessary, and things must take their course. My instructions now are to wire the failure of my mission to the English syndicate, and also to the Foreign Office at Vienna, and that ends the matter so far as I am concerned. Your Excellency is undoubtedly the loser.'

His Excellency leaned back, smiling, among his cushions, and drawled—

'*Eh bien, mon ami,* have it your own way. If ever they make you Ambassador to the Porte I pray Allah I may not be in office. You are a very devil to argue. We will sign the documents in the morning.'

'No, now, if it please your Excellency. I don't want to have to go over all the ground again.'

'Heaven forbid!' said Chakri. 'Still, to-morrow——'

'To-morrow is no man's,' said Reigne sententiously. 'Besides, it is to-morrow,'—and he pulled

out his watch,—'it is close on three o'clock,' and he slapped down the document for signature on the Pasha's table.

His Excellency's gleaming smile illuminated his face again as he said—

'You are almost as bad as a German, Monsieur Reigne; only the German would have produced his ultimatum first and gone into his arguments afterwards, and I should have been deprived of a most enjoyable chat.'

He clapped his hands, and, obedient to his orders, a sleepy attendant brought in pens and ink, and wax and a lighted taper, and Chakri lazily scrawled his name to the document and affixed his seal.

'It is hardly worth while thinking of going to bed,' he said, as he sank back among his cushions after this unusual demand upon his energies. 'Your conversational powers are so exceptional, my dear Monsieur Reigne, that I would enjoy them a while longer. I do not know when I have passed so pleasant an evening. Now tell me, Monsieur Reigne, how is our friend Count Szarvas getting on? It is quite a long time since we have met, and the last time we did not quite hit it off. He was after a concession for some fisheries on the Black Sea, and it was quite impossible to manage it for him. Afterwards His Majesty was graciously pleased to grant me the very concession the Count had been seeking, and I fear Monsieur le Comte bore me somewhat of a grudge in consequence.'

'He spoke very highly of your Excellency's business capabilities,' said Reigne, with just the wrinkle of a smile behind his cigar.

'Yes, I have no doubt he would. And Rudolf, the younger brother, have you met him?'

'I have not had that—pleasure,' said Reigne dryly, and His Excellency grinned. 'What kind of a man is he?'

'Oh, Rudolf is *bon garçon*, somewhat superfluously endowed with animal spirits, and with no means of working them off in decorous Vienna. He is travelling at present, I believe. Asia and the command of a Cossack regiment would be the thing for him, and would give him just the chance he wants. He came to me after one of his numerous escapades. We are very distantly related, I believe, in some way, and I rather enjoyed him. I thought I heard rumour of a possible marriage between him and the Princess Marie. Is there any truth in it?'

'I am sure I cannot say. I heard something said about it in Vienna.'

'It would be a great match—for Rudolf. Do you know, *mon ami*, that she is probably the richest woman in all Europe, and certainly one of the most beautiful. A trifle short-tempered, I believe, but what could not one pardon in one who possesses those other qualities in such superabundance?'

He talked on, but Reigne smoked in silence, for the thought of Marie Obdanovitch in thrall to a Rudolf Szarvas, or, in fact, to any but a Basil Reigne, made his heart sore and wroth.

'But pardon my extreme thoughtlessness, Monsieur Reigne; you are wearied with your journey and with our pleasant little chat.'

'It has been a somewhat long day,' Basil acknowledged, 'and I must confess to feeling somewhat played out. Will your Excellency be able to afford me an escort across the hills to Vilova?'

'I must, *mon ami*, if you are bent on it. The hill country is not safe with that devil Constantine out again. Perhaps you have heard of Constantine——'

'Oh yes, I've heard of him. In fact, Lord Caerleon insisted on providing me with a revolver for Constantine's benefit and such-like contingencies.'

'I fear one revolver would not be of very much use if Constantine and his gang got hold of you. I

must arrange about an escort for you. When do you wish to go on, Monsieur Reigne ? '

' Just as soon as suits your convenience, your Excellency, if you will pardon my running away.'

' My house and all it contains is at your service, *mon ami*, for as long as you choose. But '—with his usual gleaming smile—' no doubt the attractions at Vilova are greater than any I can offer you. Then I will see about the escort to-morrow, that is, as you have reminded me, to-day. And now, good night ! or rather, good morning ! May your sleep be refreshing ! '

He clapped his hands, and Basil followed the bowing servant to his room overlooking the court-yard, body, brain, and spirit alike tired out.

But when he tried to sleep he found it impossible, and the more he tried the more impossible it became. He was overwrought. His body tossed and turned, but found no rest or refreshment, and his brain went on, in spite of himself, weaving a tangled web of vain imaginings—of hopes and fears and ghastly horrors—till at last he sprang up from his restless couch, flung open the window and lit a cigar, and longed in vain for a brandy and soda. The steward, in the morning, showed him a cabinet in his room well furnished with both soda and liqueurs, and apologized for not pointing it out before, ascribing his oversight, with a smile, to the lateness of the hour at which his lordship retired.

The white moonlight cast long inky shadows of the opposite buildings across the courtyard. Everything was very still. The murmurous plashing of the fountains in the gardens, and the occasional rattle of a chain in the stables, alone broke the silence.

And then he became gradually aware of another faint, distant sound, a regular muffled beat, like the ticking of a heavy clock through a wall. It grew sharper and clearer. It puzzled him. It was coming nearer and growing louder. And then he said to himself, ' It is a horse coming up on the other side of

the house at a gallop.' And as he said it the sound ceased. He heard the dull thud of the peremptory summons on the massive outer gate, heard the gate swing heavily open, and after a short delay a steaming horse was led by one of the sleepy guards across the courtyard to bury its nose for a second in a drinking trough, and was then led away into the stables.

'Some late messenger—probably despatches for the Pasha,' thought Reigne, and supposed the matter ended.

But in another moment the stable door opened again, and the same man led out two horses, saddled and ready for the road, and walked them slowly up and down. It was evident to Reigne that there had not been time to saddle them. 'Must keep 'em always ready,' he said to himself.

'T—s—s—t!' hissed sharply from the tunnel of the gateway and summoned the horses.

Then there was a wild scrabble of hoofs, as the riders mounted and dashed away, and Reigne heard the double beat die gradually away on the still night air.

'Some one,' he said to himself, 'is in a deuce of a hurry. I wonder what 's the matter.'

CHAPTER XIX

THIN ICE ON A HOUSE-TOP

WHEN the obsequious steward ushered in the servants with coffee in the morning, he brought also a letter, which he handed to Basil, and retired with profound salaams.

The letter ran—

'My dear M. Reigne,—A sudden summons calls me to Constantinople, and the matter is so urgent

that I shall have to deprive myself even of the pleasure of saying farewell to you. Pray, however, consider my house entirely at your service with all that it contains. ("H'm!" said Basil, thinking of the latticed rooms across the courtyard.) The messenger who brought my despatches brings me word also that a troop of fifty soldiers has been despatched for the purpose of pursuing the brigand Constantine, and will arrive in this neighbourhood some time to-morrow.

'I have left a letter to the commander of said troop asking him to see you safely across the hills, and I beg of you to avail yourself of this opportunity, as thereby I shall feel relieved of all anxiety on your behalf.

'Pray accept my sincerest apologies for this hasty departure, and the assurance of my most perfect consideration. CHAKRI.'

There was evidently nothing else to be done. So Basil bathed and fed, and strolled about, and sat on the granite rim of the basin of one of the fountains in the shady garden near the ladies' quarters, and smoked, and heard himself discussed in piquant musical tones which he could not understand, interspersed with ripples of laughter which were easier of interpretation. He visited the stables and admired the Pasha's taste in horseflesh, and found, as he expected, a couple of horses standing in their stalls, saddled and bridled and ready for instant use.

Mustapha, the major-domo, begged him not to wander outside the big gates; but declined to give any reasons further than that it was the Pasha's wish, and that if anything happened to his lordship it was he, Mustapha, who would be held accountable. He dropped the remark, however, in quite a casual and matter-of-fact way, as though it were nothing out of

the common, 'I myself have not been outside the gates for over seven years.'

'Good heavens! Not outside the gates for seven years! And why?'

'I had a trouble, milord, with the family of an Albanian who used to be here. They have been waiting for me ever since.'

'And do you mean to say they are still waiting for you?'

'They are still waiting, milord,' said the man impassively; and the idea occurred to Reigne that possibly the astute Pasha utilized the vendetta for the purpose of retaining the perpetual and undivided services of his retainer.

However, as the man was evidently greatly exercised in his mind as to the safety of his master's guest, he promised not to pass the gates, though as the day wore slowly on, and the time began to hang heavily on his hands, he more than once regretted having given the promise, and but for having done so would certainly have sought pastures new outside.

The major-domo raked out for his benefit a number of odd copies of *Le Monde Illustré* and the *Journal Amusant* and some French yellow-backs, and provided him with a sufficiency of cooling drinks and decent cigars; and he lounged about the gardens and stables, and grew very tired of himself.

The enclosure was a big one, but before evening he felt as if he knew every stone of it. He had even got on friendly terms with every horse in the stables, and, to his amusement, the anxious Mustapha would come and take a look, every now and again, to satisfy himself that he had kept his word and was still inside. Each time he brought some fresh literary contribution, and each time the contribution grew more and more objectionable, till at last Reigne began to wonder where on earth the man had tapped such a hidden mine of immorality. Whenever

Mustapha approached him with extra gusto and handed him a bundle of papers with a smile of unusual satisfaction—as though to say, 'There, now, that 's just the thing you 're wanting! Surely that should keep any reasonable man quiet'—Basil knew the papers contained something unusually indecent. And when, after a cursory glance at them—for the man's satisfaction, not his own, for that kind of thing possessed absolutely no attractions for him—he dropped them on the ground with the rest, the major-domo would retire crestfallen, to delve still deeper into his mudheap, and wonder what more he could do to keep the restless Inglesi quiet. A happy thought struck him suddenly, and he came out hurriedly to Basil. There was still one place the not-to-be-satisfied milord had not yet seen. Why had he not thought of it before, thick-headed-son-of-an-incapable-Ethiopian-mother that he was?

'Would not his lordship like to view the surrounding country from the roof of the buildings? It is flat, and he can walk round and round, anywhere except—if the ladies were there, or if any of them came up, milord would understand, of course, that their privacy must be respected.'

'Of course,' said Basil, springing up; 'anything for a change. The roof is just the thing. Why didn't you think of it sooner, instead of loading me up with all that nastiness?'

And he found the wide flat roof of the old monastery, with its breast-high walls of massive stone, an admirable lounging place. The views over the lower-lying country to the south and south-west were wide and wonderful, and he leaned long over the parapet gazing his fill and thinking many thoughts; and behind him rose the rounded shoulders of the nearer Rhodopes, and somewhere behind them were Vilova and the Château Szarvas and Marie Obdanovitch.

He was deep in the enjoyment of his thoughts

and of the vast rolling expanse below him, where all the lines were mingling and softening with the evening mists, and the red sun was just sinking behind the distant Albanian mountains, when a whispered laugh from the western corner of the roof roused him to the knowledge that the major-domo's suggested possibility had become accomplished fact, and that some of the ladies of the harem had come up on to the roof to take the air.

Aware of the excessive susceptibility of Turkish feeling respecting its womankind, he remained for a few moments as though totally unaware of their presence, and then sauntered quietly away to the farther side of the roof, without ever looking in their direction.

Whatever their conduct in the seclusion of their own quarters, and whatever style of literature they might be addicted to, the lightly veiled ladies bore themselves upon the house-top with reticence and a certain languorous dignity.

In the gathering darkness Basil could make out six or eight moving figures, whose lines and graces, like the plains below in the gloaming mists, were muffled and hidden in their ample feridgis. Now they were bunched in a group, and sibilant whispers and an occasional low laugh reached him. Then they flitted to and fro like silent bats, and bunched again and whispered and laughed; and he leaned his elbows on the parapet, with his back to the mountains, and smoked thoughtfully, and watched them from afar.

Then the night air of the mountains began to take on a keener touch, and the dark flitting figures disappeared, and he seemed to have the roof to himself again. He finished his cigar as the moon came up behind the mountains, and was turning to seek the trap-door by which he had come up, when a gentle 'Ts-s-s-s-t!' arrested him.

He turned in the direction of the sound, and when it was quietly repeated walked slowly towards the place whence it came, puzzled and somewhat doubtful as to the thinness of the ice on which he might be walking.

As he expected, one of the muffled figures crouched in the shadow awaiting him, and to his very great surprise addressed him in English.

'Are you an Englishman?'

'I am, Madame.'

'Then I want your help. They said you were French. But I knew they were wrong. I want you to take me away from this.'

'But, Madame——!' he said, struck all of a heap by the magnitude of such a demand.

'This life is killing me,' she said in a tone of bitter disgust. 'I beg of you to take me away. I want nothing more of you than that.'

'But, Madame!' he began again. 'How can I possibly do such a thing? I am here as the Pasha's guest——'

'The Pasha!' she said scornfully.

'Yes, the Pasha,' he said. 'And, much as I would wish to assist a countrywoman, you must see that what you ask is impossible.'

'Impossible? And you an Englishman and I an Englishwoman!'

'Yes, it is impossible,' he said again, and tried not to say it hotly, for it seemed to him that her request was a monstrous one. 'If I can be of any service to you, in any way that is above-board and honourable, command me, but carry you away as you suggest I will not.'

'That is the only thing you can do for me.'

'That is the only thing I cannot do for you, Madame. You cannot know what you are asking. It would be an infamy, blighting more lives than my own.'

'I am very unhappy.'

'I am very sorry. But—— I presume you came here of your own free will.'

She gave him no answer, and he knew that she was full of bitter thoughts of him. The position was perilously awkward, and he did not quite know what the result might be if they were discovered.

'Then you refuse?' she said, turning upon him at last, with all the harshness of her thoughts in her voice.

'I must. I have no alternative,' he said gently.

She was silent for a moment, choking down the anger and disappointment that were in her.

'Tell them, when you get home,' she said hoarsely at last, 'that you are the only man Lady Mary Belcaster ever asked a favour of, and that you refused it.'

'Lady Mary Belcaster——!' he gasped in great amazement, for Belcaster had been his own particular chum both at Eton and Oxford, and had pulled bow to his stroke in the fastest race ever rowed over the University course. They had drifted apart, as men do. He had heard of Belcaster's marriage, but of his later doings and experiences nothing. And this was his wife!

He was still gaping at the word when she dropped suddenly into the shadow of the parapet and pulled him down with her, and whispered in his ear, 'Abdul —seeking me. He will kill us.'

Then, peeping cautiously, she flitted, soundless as a night bird, in the direction of the ladies' staircase, while Basil groaned out curses at his stupidity and his luck for bringing him into such a position.

The big negro who had come up in search of her had, by great good fortune, turned first in the other direction. She dropped into a patch of shadow on the nearer side of the staircase, and when the eunuch found her there, started up with well-feigned simula-

tion of sudden awakening from sleep, complained of her companions for leaving her in the cold, and accompanied him down the stair, and Basil Reigne, mightily relieved, and weighted with many thoughts, stole quietly away to his own staircase and descended also.

CHAPTER XX

A QUIET NIGHT AT TERAKLIA

THIS matter filled him with very great discomfort. He turned it over and over in his mind, and thought it out along all possible lines, but he could not see how he could possibly have acted differently, or that he had anything to reproach himself with. But still there remained the soreness of having refused—of having had to refuse—assistance to a fellow-countrywoman in distress. True, her unfortunate position was entirely of her own bringing about, but, as he said to himself, if help was only to be rendered on production of a certificate of immaculate conduct and purely extraneous misfortune, the fount of charity would soon dry up at its source.

He had refused her extraordinary request in the first place solely on the ground that such a breach of all the laws of hospitality would have covered him with undying infamy, and—even if he had been able to overcome that feeling—he was bound to think of those others, whose claims upon him surely outweighed those of an entire stranger. Why should the dear old father's life be darkened? Why should Marie Obdanovitch—— ? No, he had done the only possible thing, and he would not worry about it.

Tired of himself and his thoughts, he determined to get to bed early and secure a long night's sleep, and so be ready for an early start on the morrow.

There was no news yet of the detachment, but the

troops would quite likely rest during the heat of the day and travel in the cool of the night, and they might arrive at any time and want to go on their way at once.

It is one thing, however, to retire early determined on a good night's sleep, and a very different thing to compass it. He lay long, as on the previous night, tossing and turning—reproaching himself, justifying himself—anything but sleeping, and this night, too, was not to pass without its little incident which shed a still further sidelight, of a somewhat lurid hue, on the manners and customs among which for the moment he was cast.

He woke up in the middle of the night from a fitful doze, and lay listening through the open window to the splashing of the fountains, and the homely sounds of hoof and chain from the stables across the courtyard, and then he heard the sound of a heavy measured tread down below—backwards and forwards, slowly and ceaselessly, it came and went.

'Some one doing sentry-go,' he said to himself. 'Is that for my benefit, I wonder?' and, curious to know, he got up and looked down into the courtyard.

The moon was paling towards the west. The slow heavy tread came from the direction of the latticed verandah behind which lay the ladies' quarters, and all this part of the building was in heavy shadow. The footsteps approached his end of the verandah, and for a moment he saw a burly negro emerge into the moonlight, stand for a moment, then turn and saunter slowly back upon his beat. As he watched the smaller shadow disappear into the larger and become only a sound, his eye got a sudden impression of movement among the shrubs of the garden.

He scanned them intently, but saw only motionless shadows. The guard had turned, and was coming towards him again. He emerged into the light once

more, stood for the space of five seconds, then turned again, and disappeared into the darkness.

And this time Reigne saw that his eyes had not deceived him. A dark figure slipped from behind a bush, and before the sentry turned, was safe in the shadow of another bush somewhat nearer the window where Basil stood in the shadow.

Reigne watched the little comedy with amused interest.

And suddenly the comedy turned to tragedy.

The negro halted longer this time at the end of his beat, and yawned wearily. Then he sauntered slowly back. Half-way down he wheeled suddenly, just as the black figure among the bushes was slipping into a still nearer ambush. Then without challenge or hesitation a sharp report rang out, a dark body sank down at the foot of the bush of concealment, writhed for a moment, and lay still, and the negro resumed his interrupted beat.

Reigne's impulse was to shout and spring down from the window, but a wise discretion held him quiet. He was in a strange land, and common sense told him not to mix himself up in matters he did not understand.

But this little event gave him much food for thought. Was it simply the case of a common thief caught in the act, or was there something more in it than that? It struck him that it was hard enough for an honest man to get inside Chakri's fortress; it did not seem to him at all likely that any common thief could gain an entrance. And if no common thief, then what? Later on he got a clue, and in the great unravelling which came still later he got a glimmering idea of the strange turns and twists of fate which forced the master hand to spoil and damage the tools which tried to work without him.

In the morning the fountains were splashing as

merrily as ever, and the doves were fluttering and preening themselves among the trees, and when Basil strolled by the bush which was photographed on his brain, the white sea-shell gravel of the path had been newly raked over.

The obsequious Mustapha approached him with many bows, and informed him that the troops had arrived, and that the major in command was awaiting the favour of his company at table.

Basil was sorely tempted to question him as to the occurrence of the night, but a sense of the courtesy due to his host restrained him, and he followed his guide to the small salon where his meals were always served.

CHAPTER XXI

IN QUEST OF CONSTANTINE

BASIL found the bimbashi a cheery little officer of the old school, of sixty years of age or thereabouts, very stout and very slow, both of speech and movement. He intimated, in a mixture of French and Turkish, that he had received the Pasha's letter, and would esteem it the pleasure of his life to see Mr. Reigne safely across the hills, during the operations against the thrice-accursed Constantine. His men would be ready to start in a couple of hours, after they had fed and rested, and the sooner they were off the better.

Two hours later saw the troop winding slowly up the lower slopes of the Rhodopes. An advance guard was thrown out to prevent surprise. Basil and the stout little bimbashi came next, on foot, as in most places the hills were quite beyond the possibilities of a horse, and as the pace of the troop was the pace of the commander, its progress was very slow. Half a dozen mules carried provisions and

small shelter-tents, and it seemed to Basil that, barring brigands, the detachment had every prospect of an exceedingly pleasant little picnic before it.

Conversation was, of course, somewhat restricted, as Basil had only a smattering of Turkish, and the bimbashi knew only a few words of French and English. But of these, like Hussein the smith, he made the very best use, and filled up the gaps with such nods and winks and hieroglyphic gestures of satisfaction with his present company, and was so amusingly anxious to entertain the stranger, that he and Basil became quite friendly.

'Sevastopol!' he panted, making of his old experiences, just as the smith had done, a passport to this new friendship, '*Oui, oui!* Yes, yes!' and pointed to his capacious bosom, on which rested the Crimean medals, and nodded like an automaton. 'Plevna, yes, yes! Oh yes!' and held up four fingers and nodded his grizzled cannon-ball of a head to indicate that he had been through all the four battles, and that it was a very devil of a time. When he spoke of Osman — Ghazi Osman — he launched into such a turgid flood of the vernacular that Basil could only nod, with raised eyebrows, and feign the greatest interest and appreciation, and wonder to what he was committing himself.

They wound higher and higher into the hills, and at last halted for a rest on a plateau, which afforded a fine view of the lovely scenery of the foot-hills and of the great rolling masses of purple mountains in front.

It was hot, tiring work to a man who rode seventeen stone and never walked a step if he could help it, and the bimbashi sat down and mopped his head and gratefully accepted another of Basil's cigars. He gazed steadily at the great spread of mountain, and then at his handful of men sprawling on the turf, then, waving his hand comprehensively over the

rolling range, and ending with a contemptuous flick towards his men, he shrugged out an immense sigh and looked despondently at Basil.

'Yes,' said the Englishman, shaking his head, 'it's a tough job. Plenty of room for hide-and-seek there.'

'Heidsieck!' murmured the little commander, mopping his fiery brow, with a groan of unsatisfied longing. 'Ah—h—h—h!'

Then he lay down flat on his back and drew his fez over his eyes, crossed his hands comfortably on his stomach, and had ten minutes' refreshing sleep.

When their commander awoke, the troop got *en route* again, and tramped steadily on and up, in hopes of somewhere getting scent of the brigands. They halted for a midday meal, and the men thoroughly enjoyed themselves, cooking their little messes and devouring them with a mountain-air relish, and laughing and singing the while. This kind of thing was miles ahead of Adrianople and the barracks there, and they did not care how long it lasted. When he got up from his meal, Basil caught the bimbashi sizing up one of the little mules with a longing look in his eye. But the mules were very small and the major was very stout and very heavy, and at last, with a sigh, he turned away and gave the order to fall in.

All through the afternoon they climbed on and up, and Basil had just about made up his mind that unless the gentlemen of the hills chose to show themselves the expedition would be a bootless one, when a sudden disturbance in front gave a fillip to his hopes of something better.

The advance was just topping a ridge when, with a shout of warning, the men flung themselves down, and a shot came whistling past. Then, without waiting for orders, they began blazing away as fast as they could snap in the cartridges, with the evident

intention of lightening their pouches as rapidly as possible.

'Hourrah!' cried the little bimbashi, at the same time hurling at his men a hoarse command to stop firing. He had had plenty of experience of that kind of shooting and knew just what its value was; and he and Basil crept forward to reconnoitre.

On the opposite ridge, with a little green valley between, they saw a number of heads cautiously peering their way, and as soon as they were seen a rattling volley came singing and spattering among the rocks.

'Fair shots, anyhow,' said Basil, and the little bimbashi said nothing. He had hauled out his field-glass and was gazing eagerly at the enemy. Then he asked Basil for his handkerchief, because his own was a green one, tied it on to his sword, and waved it above their rampart of rock.

'Not brigands,' he said disappointedly in French, and stepped out on to the ridge, and Basil followed him.

Two tall men from the opposite side came down to meet them, and as they drew near the taller of the two cried cheerily—

'Well, Reigne, *mon ami*, what kind of sport are you having? Shot any brigands yet?'

'Good heavens, Count, is that you? You have spoiled all our fun. We were hoping you were the great Constantine himself, and my little friend here had, I believe, already gazetted himself Pasha on the strength of your dead body.'

'Ah!' said the Count, 'so sorry to disoblige you both.'

'Permit me to introduce you,' said Basil. 'Bimbashi—Count Alexander Szarvas.'

The little major touched his fez somewhat sulkily, and the Count raised his hunting-cap, and introduced his friend as Lieutenant Gospadof, of the 17th Regi-

ment of Bulgarian Infantry, and then burst into animated converse in Turkish with the bimbashi. The Count passed round his cigar-case, and they sat down on the grass to talk, while their followers clustered on either ridge of the smiling green valley and scowled sullenly across at one another.

Szarvas was in the highest of spirits, and evidently enjoyed the situation more than did the Turk. However, the latter soon got over his disappointment, though his manner suggested to Basil that he strongly resented Count Szarvas not turning out to be the notorious brigand, and he readily agreed to join forces with the lieutenant and search the mountains together.

'We are after the brigands too,' the Count explained to Basil. 'That rascal Constantine has touched the Turks in their sorest place by carrying off another tax-collector and his funds. The Bulgarian Government has been asked to assist in his capture. Gospadof was detailed from Zarnova for the duty, and I came to see the fun. We shall have a real good time, I guess, as your friend the American Minister says, but I very much doubt if we shall come across Constantine. So far we have seen no trace of him. And you——?'

'Not a shadow. You were the first gleam of hope we had had, and you've turned out a fraud!' At which the Count laughed gaily, and Gospadof smiled grimly.

'And how did you leave the ladies, Count?' asked Basil as soon as the chance offered.

'About as well as could be expected under the circumstances,' laughed Szarvas. 'They are bearing the infliction of Baron Juthenheim with admirable patience, in hopes of brighter days. It is surprising what a dislike they have for that old wretch, especially Marie. I really would hardly like to trust her out in the same shooting party with him.'

'The Princess hardly struck me as being murderously inclined,' said Basil, smiling to himself at the remembrance of her as he saw her last.

'Marie is very thorough in her likes and dislikes, and she hates the Baron like poison. By the way, how did you get on with friend Chakri?'

'Oh, first rate! He was most courteous, but, as you said, a tough fighter. He reminded me of you in many points, Count.'

'Yes, I told you he would. Why didn't he come out with you to hunt up the brigands? Too lazy, I suppose!'

'He was called away suddenly, and I did not see him after the first night.'

'Ho, ho! What mischief is brewing now, I wonder. It must have been something important to take Chakri away at a moment's notice. Where was he off to—the capital?'

'I was not so indiscreet as to ask him, Count.'

And the Count laughed.

A plan of campaign was soon arranged. The Turks were to spread over the mountains to the right and the Bulgarians to the left, keeping within touch, but not intermixing for fear of trouble. And so, by carefully beating up the whole of the range, there might be a chance of coming across traces of the brigands.

This plan was carried out and resulted in an exceedingly pleasant picnic, as the Count had foretold, but led to nothing whatever in the shape of brigands.

The weather was magnificent, the air exhilarating, and the twenty-mile tramp each day brought them all into perfect condition for thorough enjoyment of the jovial circle round the camp fire at night.

But of Constantine and his band they saw nothing!

CHAPTER XXII

OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY

FOR three days they ranged the hills, spreading out in a long wavering line and beating thoroughly every possible cover, but came across nothing more than old camp fires and occasional foot trails, which might have been made by brigands or by any one else.

At night they lighted their own fires, cooked savoury messes of the game they had shot during the day, and beguiled the long evenings with endless pipes, while jest and song and story circled the dancing flames and kept them all in the merriest of humours. The little Turkish major reeled off long yarns anent his Plevna exploits, and proved himself beyond all question a very mighty hero, for there was no one to deny him. Reigne sang them patriotic British songs ; Szarvas gave them the very latest productions of the Paris music-halls ; and even Gospadof, who seemed of a dour and surly disposition and spoke little in the daytime, unbent at night and roared wild Hungarian love-songs in a voice that got on Reigne's nerves till he wanted to get up and kick something.

And then, the last pipe smoked and the last song sung, they crept into their tiny tents, rolled themselves in their blankets, and woke to a new day.

It was all very novel to Reigne, and he enjoyed the free, open-air camp-life thoroughly ; but his time was running, they seemed just as near to the brigands as on the day they started, and this was not exactly the kind of sport—or company, to which he had been looking forward for so long.

During the midday halt on the third day, Szarvas turned to him, rolling a cigarette—

'What say you, Monsieur Reigne, shall we continue this amusing but unprofitable chase, or shall we, you and I, strike for the Château? It lies about fifteen miles in a bee-line over yonder hills. Brigands or the ladies—which?' and he fixed his keen, cool eyes on the Englishman's face.

"I am quite at your service, Count. We know where to find the ladies, and we don't seem to know where to find the brigands.'

'Truly! And, as I may have affairs awaiting me at the Château, I propose a move in that direction. So, gentlemen!'—turning to Gospadof and the bimbashi—'we will drink one more bumper to your success, and then, by your leave, we will wish you "*Au revoir.*"'

'Success to you!' said Reigne.

'To your early meeting with Constantine!' said the Count.

'Constantine!' growled Gospadof sourly.

'To the slipperiest devil I have never met, and may the meeting be soon!' chirped the bimbashi.

'I should suggest your still working in concert,' said the Count, turning to Gospadof, 'and from what I know of the feeling at headquarters, I am sure that would be in accordance with their views.'

'Right!' growled Gospadof, and as the long line of beaters started for another pleasant but unprofitable afternoon's excursion, Reigne and the Count struck off down the mountain side in the direction of Vilova, and Basil's pulses beat fast at the thought that every step brought him nearer to the Princess Marie.

'What are their chances of coming up with the elusive one, Count?' he asked, to beguile the time as they tramped along.

'Not worth a button. Constantine is probably

watching their every movement, and retreating step by step as they advance. He is much too old a bird to have salt put on his tail in this fashion. Then he knows every foot of these mountains, and it is a mighty big playground.'

'Have you ever met him?'

'I have had no less than four different individuals pointed out to me at four different times as Constantine, by men who said they knew him intimately. I have come to the conclusion that Constantine is a composite character—a type rather than an individual.'

'That is interesting.'

'My idea is confirmed by the rapidity of the fellow's movements. It is almost incredible that one man can accomplish all the misdeeds ascribed to Constantine. One day he lifts a tax-gatherer with his plunder on the Turkish slopes, and the next he is collaring some nice, plump, ransomable prey thirty or forty miles away on this side of the hills.'

'He has never troubled you?'

'Never,' replied the Count, with a quiet laugh. 'Marie says I bribe him to keep away. But, whatever the reason, he has never harried the Château yet. If he knew what ransom the Princess could afford I doubt if he would let such a chance slip. I must take precautions. There is not much that Constantine does not know if it is worth his while to know it. Yes,' he continued musingly, lying flat on his back for a rest, and puffing a cigarette, 'what with you, Monsieur Reigne, and the Russian Ambassador, and Desrolles, and Delsarti, and the Princess, and Vandenbyl! My conscience! What a sensation he could make if he raked you all in. After that he could retire to Crete, or Monaco, or Paris, and live a quiet, genteel, respectable life for the rest of his days. Build a church somewhere, perhaps.'

'If he didn't get a bullet into him in the attempt.'

'Of course, there is always that off-chance. But so far the bullet doesn't seem to have been cast that would interfere with the little amusements of Master Constantine.'

'Do you know, Monsieur Reigne,' he continued confidentially, 'I have sometimes considered the idea of some such combination myself, but I have never had the time and opportunity to work the idea out. It is rather captivating though. Monsieur Constantine, in the hills, filling his coffers from the pockets of the governments and the wealthy ones who can afford to be bled. Monsieur—Szarvas, say—living a life of luxurious idleness at Monte Carlo, and Paris, and even '—with a shrug—'London! There is a certain fascination in the idea. Don't you think so?'

'I can't say it attracts me particularly. Anyhow it would be a pretty risky business.'

'That would add zest to it, of course.'

'Every man to his taste, Count. I would sooner sit safe on the ground than be always on the knife-edge.'

'For some folks the knife-edge has its charm.'

The walking was rough, and in three hours they had covered not more than seven or eight miles. A grassy slope invited another halt, and they flung themselves down on it. Reigne got out a cigar, and was cutting it with delicate anticipation, when the report of a carbine rang out and a bullet plugged into the turf just alongside him.

'Hello!' he said, looking up and around. 'Somebody's making targets of us. Is this one of the customs of the country, Count?'

Count Alex had sat up too, and was looking keenly around.

A curl of blue-white smoke above a distant boulder showed whence the shot came.

Without replying in words, Szarvas flattened himself on the grass and rolled downhill to an outcrop

of rock which afforded shelter of a kind, so long as they lay flat behind it.

'This is deucedly unpleasant,' he said, as Reigne joined him, after running the gauntlet of another shot which missed him by about a foot.

'Brigands?' queried Basil.

'Peasants, most likely, taking us for brigands. They all go armed about here.'

'If they have the sense to turn our position and take us in flank it will be a poor look-out for us.'

'Yes, but we can't well introduce ourselves at eight hundred yards.'

'Well, what's to be done?' asked Basil, lighting his cigar.

The Count reached out for a bit of stick, and having secured it, put his handkerchief on the end of it and hoisted it above their rampart.

In an instant a shot came whistling through it.

'No handkerchiefs wanted to-day,' said Basil—'Next?'

The Count's imperturbable suavity seemed to have deserted him. He looked black and angry. After a moment's consideration he broke the stick in two.

'Hoist your cap on that,' he said, 'and I will do the same. Then when they fire throw up your arms as if their shot had got home. That may draw them close enough to talk to.'

Basil was not sure whether it was comedy or tragedy they were enacting, but nothing better suggested itself and he did as he was bid.

The caps were cautiously elevated, as though the wearers were incautiously moving behind the rock. Two shots rang out. A bullet pierced Basil's cap and carried it a dozen feet away. They both flung up their arms and rolled over and lay still, though Basil could hardly lie for laughing.

'We have missed our vocation, Count,' he said.

'We ought to be on the stage. Drury Lane or the Adelphi would be just about our shape.'

'Hist!' said the Count, and presently they heard voices and the tread of feet.

When they came close enough the Count sprang up and poured out a flood of angry invective on the shooters, two wiry, swarthy-faced, fiercely-moustached mountaineers, in short jackets with bandoliers slung across them, and voluminous white kilts. They had stopped short and now stood leaning on their long carbines, and occasionally muttered a sulky word in reply to the Count's objurgations.

He spoke in Bulgarian, and when he had finished the men shouldered their guns and strode away up the hill.

'Well?' asked Basil. 'What's the matter?'

'The rascals!' replied the Count, looking after them, his face still black with anger; 'they say they mistook us for brigands.'

'And what are they?'

'Villagers from Taxil, they say. As likely as not they are in league with the brigands. It's well it is no worse. Let us get on, Monsieur Reigne.'

The sun had dipped behind the western hills, and the hollows were filling with creeping shadows, when, after another stiff three hours' walk over a much rougher path than the bee travels, they topped the final ridge, and saw, down below, the winding white ribbon of a road which leads past the Château Szarvas from Taxil to Vilova.

'Ah, *v'là!*' said the Count with an accession of spirits. 'Now we are near home. We shall be in time for dinner after all. Another half-hour and we are there.'

And Reigne was glad to hear it, and gladder still when at last they turned off the high road, between a pair of stone pillars unencumbered with gates, into an avenue of larches, and saw the Château in front of them.

All the house-party seemed gathered on the verandah, and as the new-comers were recognized they crowded to the railings to give them welcome.

The Countess Anna was there, and Adela Melita, with Desrolles on one side and Delsarti on the other, and Julius Vandenbyl, the American financier whom Szarvas was cultivating into some of his many schemes, and several Austrians, strangers to Reigne, but all very much at home, and all in the highest of spirits. And there, chiefest of all, was the sweet, bright face with the wonderful eyes which had filled Basil Reigne's soul and memory since ever he first saw them.

The Count strode in, shaking hands right and left with both hands. He kissed the Countess on both cheeks, and the hands of the other ladies, and Reigne regretted the insular stiffness which prevented him from following suit. His welcome, however, was of the warmest, and he felt very much at his ease at once.

'Ah, ah, Reigne, *mon ami*, where in Heaven's name have you sprung from? Your baggage arrived here eight days ago, and every day we have said to ourselves, "Still fine weather!"—See it, *mon enfant*? It took me three days to make that joke, and Delsarti does not see it yet—thanks to his ignorance of the barbarous language! He has tried his very hardest, but he can make neither tail nor head of it. And where did you and the Count tumble across one another? We expected you from the east and you come from the west, and we rather hoped the Count had at last fallen into the clutches of the wicked Constantine. Where is he, Count? Did you not find him? Have you not got his scalp with you, or any little bits of him about you?'

'Not a scrap of him,' said the Count. 'We never even got a glimpse of his shadow.'

'No? Well, well! Maybe it's just as well. If

you 'd got as near as that you probably would not be here to tell the tale. The Countess has been in a great state ever since we got your message that you had gone brigand-hunting. She has been fearing all kinds of things. Let me see, it is seven—eight days —since you left us in the lurch. I did my best to get Delsarti and the others to organize a search-party, so that we might, at all events, have some relics in case Constantine had wiped you all out. But they were lazy and would not come. They salved their consciences by saying you were much better able to take care of yourself than I was.'

'I accept the will for the deed, my dear Desrolles,' said the Count. 'I owe you all an apology. You see, I met my old friend Gospadof close to the Tchertal Dagh that day, and nothing would do but I must go along with him. It was a chance not to be missed, and he would not wait an hour. He was under most stringent orders to get into touch at once with the Turkish troops sent out on the same errand, and he was afraid of missing them. I would have liked you all to be there, but it was with difficulty I got him to detach a man to carry my message, and we started at the same time as he did. You would have enjoyed it, Desrolles.'

'Y—e—s, *faute de mieux*, I might, Count, but we got along quite comfortably in your absence. If you had taken along Delsarti and Mr. Vandenbyl our enjoyment would have been complete. However, we put up with them as well as we could.'

'What a flow of language the little man has,' said Delsarti gravely, to the company in general. 'His talents are absolutely wasted in the diplomatic service. He ought to be on the stage, or in the Corps Législatif. In either he would rise to distinction.'

'Praise from such a quarter is praise indeed,' bowed Desrolles.

'Are you two squabbling still? I left you at it

and I find you at it. Cannot you keep them in order, Madame Adela ? ' asked the Count.

' I, Count ? I have no power over them.'

At which Desrolles and Delsarti both heaved a heavy sigh and tried their best to look dejected.

Basil's welcome from the Princess had been a warm grip of the hand that set the blood tingling through his veins, and a straight glad look from the dark eyes that filled the world with golden light for him.

' And Juthenheim ? ' asked the Count. ' Where is the Baron ? Have you made away with him ? '

' Yes,' laughed the Princess ; ' we made things so extremely uncomfortable for him that he went off in a huff three days ago. The sun has shone brighter ever since, and Adela and the Duchess arrived yesterday morning.'

' Come along, Monsieur Reigne,' said the Count. ' I will show you to your room. Dinner is in half an hour.'

And he led the way into the house, and up the broad staircase which mounted to the great wooden gallery round the central hall.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE COUNT AT HOME

REIGNE found his baggage awaiting him in his room, and when he had dressed he came out into the gallery, and leaning his arms on the railing took a survey of his surroundings.

In the big fireplace down below, and just opposite to him, a great fire of dry logs blazed and hissed, and shot out sharp reports and puffs of fragrant blue smoke. Many heads of animals—bears and boars and wolves and small deer—hung upon the walls, and the wavering, uncertain light endowed them with

brief, grotesque life, as the white fangs grinned and the glassy eyes winked and twinkled responsive to the dancing flames.

These trophies of the chase, with racks of rifles and shot-guns in between, formed the only ornaments of the walls. Round the hearth were deep, comfortable leather couches and huge easy-chairs, with small tables scattered about promiscuously, and large Japanese screens to shut out wandering draughts. At the farther end of the hall the blaze of light and the tinkle of glass and china coming through an open door betokened the dining-room.

Reigne was enjoying the rich, subdued picturesqueness of it all, when the slow tap-tap of a cane coming along the gallery brought him round face to face with the Duchess of Malplaquet.

'Ah! Basil, *mon enfant*, you are there. I heard you had arrived. Give me your arm down these accursed stairs. I always fear I shall slip and disarrange myself and perhaps break my leg. I am very glad you have come. I am dying to have a reasonable human man to talk to.'

'Why, Duchess, what has upset you? That is pretty rough on Desrolles and the rest!'

'Desrolles and Delsarti are simply human monkeys, my boy. That American is a dollar-mill. He talks dollars from morning till night, and dreams dollars from night till morning. He wants to syndicate everything he sees. Whenever he looks at me I know that he is appraising me, and whenever he speaks to me I expect him to make an offer to convert me into a limited company. I know he is going to offer to run Adela. I can see it in his eye. As to the Austrians, they know nothing but army manœuvres and horses. Give me your arm and take me down to the salon. You shall sit next to me, and we shall both be happy. Marie sits on your other side.'

Basil gave the old lady his arm with alacrity, and conveyed her safely downstairs. She tapped her way to the far end of the room.

'I always like to be in first; I feel ten years younger when I am sitting down.—That is Marie's chair next to me,' she said, 'but I shall insist upon your sitting there, and Marie will take the next again. Then with Anna at the end here, and Adela opposite, I shall begin to feel quite at home.'

'You are the most charming old lady I ever met,' said Basil.

'Yes, you have told me so before. It is not everybody says so, but I can be when I like. See you keep me in good-humour by doing your duty by my little friend here,' and she nodded towards chair number three.

Basil looked down at her steadfastly. 'Now what may you mean by that?' was in his face, but he only looked at her, and the Duchess added sententiously—

'Duty and inclination don't often run together: it's a good thing when they do.'

The rest of the party came trooping in, and Basil sat down to his dinner, between the Duchess and Princess Marie, in the highest of spirits.

'You do not object to me having my boy next to me, Anna?' cooed the Duchess softly. 'I do not feel at home with that dollar-man nor with those army men. Dollars and horses in the abstract do not interest me.'

'We want you to make yourself just as comfortable as you can, Duchess,' said the Countess, smiling. But Count Alex, at the other end of the table, looked as though his long tramp over the hills had been rather too much for him; or possibly his letters had disagreed with him. The wise man opens his mail after a meal, never before one.

The dinner passed merrily, however. Basil gave

the ladies at his end of the table a humorous account of some portions of his travels since he saw them last. They were specially interested in his description of Chakri Pasha's country-house, and the Duchess asked many questions about Chakri himself. She prided herself on knowing everything that was worth knowing about everybody of importance, and Chakri was evidently a puzzle to her.

'That man has been pushed up into a certain position,' she said, 'by sheer indolence and force of circumstances, so far as I can learn. He was at Plevna, I suppose. They all were, or at all events they say so, and it comes to much the same thing. And since then he has made his way by never being at hand when he was wanted. He happened just to drop into a place where it played his master's game to have a stumbling-block, and Chakri, they say, is admirably adapted for the post.'

'It probably suits him to pose that way,' said Reigne, 'but he struck me as a remarkably clever man. You have met him, Countess, have you not?'

'I do not think so,' said the Countess in a tone of thoughtful puzzlement. 'I certainly do not remember him. But one meets so many people one can hardly remember them all.'

'He spoke as though he were acquainted with both you and the Princess Marie.'

'Really!' said the Princess. 'This is very interesting. I have a good memory for people, but I don't remember ever meeting Chakri Pasha. What is he like, Mr. Reigne? Photograph him for us.'

'Well, if you took the Count there and gave him a dark, pointed beard, and put a fez on him, and clothed him in loose, flowing robes, and buried him in cushions, and smothered him in smoke in a dimly-lighted room, you would get a very fair likeness of

the Pasha as I saw him. He says, by the way, what the Count had already told me, that he is some very distant relation of the Count's—hundred-and-twenty-first half-cousin, or something like that. I thought I caught an occasional resemblance of tone and manner, though my fancy may, of course, have sprung from my knowledge of the fact.'

'We certainly ought to know our hundred-and-twenty-first half-cousin,' said the Princess. 'Alex, have we ever met Cousin Chakri? Why don't you introduce your distinguished foreign relatives to your family?'

'I am sure I can't say if you have met him, Marie,' came the reply, with a gleaming smile, from the Count. 'The roll of your acquaintance is not in my keeping. As to introducing him to you, I will do so on the first occasion that offers. He has, I believe, too many attractions at home to permit of his wandering far away.'

But the Duchess had fallen into a brown study—her eyes fixed on the tablecloth—the nervous white hand flashing out dazzling sparks and splinters of flame as it toyed with the spoons and forks in front of her. She was evidently puzzled, but eventually gave it up with a shake of the head.

'*Nein!*' she said. 'I do not know enough of the Szarvas family tree to know how that came about. Now if it had been your own family'—turning to the Princess—'I would have been able to tell you all about it. I know your people's story like a book, right back past the time of Mad Paul, who nailed his wife up in the forester's hut, and set it on fire and danced round it till she was burned to death. And Prince John, who married the Russian, and was done to death by——'

'Oh, don't tell us any more,' said the Princess. 'We 're an awful lot. I hope it doesn't run in the blood.'

And Basil looked into the great dark eyes and thought he would gladly take all risks; for, whatever her ancestors might have been, it was surely a noble and beautiful soul that shone out of the eyes of Marie Obdanovitch.

CHAPTER XXIV

GOLDEN DAYS

AND now began the golden days for Basil Reigne, and he would have been well content to have them last for ever.

The Count and Countess made the best of hosts, and whatever feeling Szarvas might have on the subject of the Princess Marie's frank appreciation of the young Englishman, he showed him nothing but the suavest courtesy and cordiality.

Sunrise each morning saw the active members of the party *en route* for the mountains. All day long the merry shouts, punctuated at long intervals by the cracks of the rifles and the ring of the shotguns, echoed along the hillsides. The midday rendezvous round the laden hampers were feasts to be remembered. Jokes and jests in half a dozen languages flashed to and fro, and songs were sung and stories told, and the bright eyes of the Princess Marie were an inspiration and a challenge to them all.

Sunset saw them trooping home, and round the wood fire in the great hall after dinner, the humours and accidents and all the doings of the day were recounted and discussed. And Delsarti and Desrolles fought wordy duels over the Melita, and Adela laughed over them till she cried, and then sang them all into serenity again. And Basil Reigne watched Marie Obdanovitch, and his heart went out to her more and more, and the Princess knew it.

Reigne had travelled far and seen much. The greatest houses in Europe had welcomed him as guest, first for his father's sake, and then for his own. But nowhere had he found so much to enjoy as he did here, and of no place did he carry more glowing memories than of the great hall of the Château Szarvas.

Compared with many of the great houses of whose hospitality he had partaken, the Château was a mere shanty of course, but for him, already, the presence of Marie Obdanovitch would have transformed the meanest peasant hut into the most glorious palace of delight.

But apart even from that, that great hall of the Château Szarvas was an extremely delightful place, especially in the evening after dinner, when the whole party gathered round the big wood fire, and the dancing flames gleamed brightly on arms and trophies, and on arms of softer mould, and on fair white shoulders, and the fierce fangs on the walls laughed with the faces down below, as quip and jest flew to and fro and kept the party merry.

It was the sixth day of his visit. They had had a glorious day on the hills, starting off with the rising of the sun, and only trooping home in detachments, as the chances of the day had sorted them out, when the light was running up the hills and failing from the summits.

Basil came out of his room into the wide gallery, and found Marie Obdanovitch leaning her white arms on the railing and looking laughingly down on the folks below. He stepped alongside and found a pleasure in leaning on the same rail, and said quietly—

'*La Princesse s'amuse.*'

'Truly they are funny, those two,' she said, without looking round. Her perfect naturalness was not the least of her many charms. She made no pretences

of any kind. 'I wonder Adela permits them to carry on so.'

'Don't you think Madame Adela enjoys them?' asked Basil.

'She is much too sensible, I should think. She suffers in silence, I suppose, and she is too good-natured to spoil any one's enjoyment. Do you know that Adela is an extremely fine woman—one out of a million, Mr. Reigne?'

'Her friendships prove it.'

'Thanks, that is very pretty. But, compliments apart, I do not know any other woman who would have gone through what Adela has, and have risen above it all, and become the woman she is. Her troubles have mellowed her. They would have crazed and broken any one else. You know her story?'

'Only partially, from words here and there; but I know it is a sad one.'

'She is the only daughter of Count John Varsova, a Pole, like Anna and myself, and she was at school with us. The Grand Duke Paul Alexis married her privately within three months of her leaving school—such a lovely girl she was then—and we were all delighted at her good fortune. But the Czar would not have it. As soon as he heard of it he sent Paul Alexis off to the other end of Siberia, annulled the marriage, and shut Adela up in a fortress on the White Sea. Her baby was born in prison and died there. Then the Grand Duke died in Siberia, and they let Adela out. All Europe is at her feet now, but she would not sing in Russia to save her life. Ah, that Russia!' and she smote the gallery rail with her small white hand.

'You are almost English in your dislike of the White Bear, Princess.'

'When I like, I like, and when I hate, I hate with all my soul. I and mine have suffered much from

Russia, and there are things one never forgets. There goes the gong! Will you take me down, Mr. Reigne?'

The Count had departed suddenly three days before on one of his many journeys. They had got used to his rapid comings and goings. Presumably, some of his numerous irons had been cooling and he had gone to heat them up.

He dropped in on them this night just after dinner, when the company had gathered round the crackling wood fire in the great hall, and with a rapid glance through the encircling screens took in the disposition of the various members of the party.

The Countess Anna and the Duchess and Adela Melita were on a couch running out at right angles from the corner of the big fireplace.

Desrolles and Delsarti hovered around them. Julius Vandenbyl, rolling a big cigar from side to side of his mouth, was describing with great gusto, and much energetic play of finger on palm, the internal working of a cotton corner which he had run in New Orleans, to three Austrian officers, who smoked their cigarettes imperturbably, and regarded him with an air of well-fed, amused mystification, as though he were some new kind of mechanical toy.

Basil Reigne and Princess Marie, on the farther side of the fireplace, were bending over a halma table playing a perfunctory game, which a close observer might have considered but a cover for a *tête-à-tête*. As a matter of fact, they had come to relish one another's society so much that the day was all too short for them, and the evening game *à deux* afforded a not-to-be-neglected extension of their enjoyment.

And, to judge from the almost imperceptible frown which swept over his face as he noted them, Count Alexander was not far wrong in his estimate of the matter

Desrolles was urging the Melita to sing for them.

'You will never have a more appreciative audience, Madame Adela,' he said. 'What we lack in numbers we more than make up in quality and receptiveness.'

'My dear Desrolles, cannot you perceive that Madame is fatigued with her exertions on the hills?' said Delsarti. 'Sing for us yourself one of your two songs, and leave Madame Adela in peace for one night.'

'My dear boy, I sang you "La Marseillaise" last night, and "Partant pour la Syrie" the night before, and each time, if I remember rightly, you left the room.'

'They affected me greatly,' said Delsarti solemnly. 'Still I have no doubt we can stand them again. Do you not understand, my dear Desrolles, that to sing in this atmosphere of smoke is exceedingly trying for a cultivated throat; in fact, for any one with a throat less like a—er—that is—less seasoned than yours.'

'Tut, tut, my friend! Madame's enjoyment in singing is as great almost as ours in listening. To the possessor of a unique talent there is no higher enjoyment than the exercise of it. Is it not so, Madame Adela?'

'No doubt, Monsieur Desrolles; but Signor Delsarti is right, I am somewhat fatigued to-night. We walked far to-day.'

'And had good sport, I trust, Madame Adela,' said the Count from behind.

'How you startled me, Alex!' cried the Countess. 'You always make my heart jump into my mouth when you come in like that.'

'We thought you were in Vienna, Count,' said Desrolles.

'I trust the wish was not father to the thought, *mon ami*.'

'On the contrary, the only thing lacking to make

our enjoyment perfect was yourself. Delsarti was in great form to-day. He shot almost the whole of half a snipe, single-handed, all by himself!'

'And the other half?' laughed the Count. 'Who completed the slaughter?'

'Madame Adela helped him out and put the poor bird out of its agony.'

'Ah, ha!' retorted the Italian. 'To-morrow take care of yourself, *mon ami*, or maybe you will need the assistance of Madame Adela to complete my next shot.'

'Gentlemen!' cried the little Frenchman dramatically. 'You hear the threat? If I am brought home weltering in my gore you will know whose hand dealt the blow!'

'They go on like this the whole time,' said Madame Melita, laughing, to the Count. 'I really think you must ask only one of them at a time in future.'

'Oh, Madame!' cried the delinquents with one voice.

'*Tiens!*' from Desrolles. 'See, we embrace!'

'He is as dear to me as my own brother, *ce drôle de* Desrolles,' said Delsarti, as they embraced with effusion, and added quietly, 'My brother and I never did get on together.'

'You are just a pair of big schoolboys,' laughed Madame Melita. 'You need a master to keep you in order.'

'Or a mistress,' said Desrolles, with his hand on his heart.

The Austrians regarded this little by-play with their amused air of after-dinner tolerance. Julius Vandenbyl's cigar cocked up contemptuously in one corner of his mouth, and he eyed the performers as though they were a couple of superfluous monkeys on an over-stocked market.

The Princess Marie and Basil Reigne were too much absorbed in their game, and in one another, to notice what was going on.

'And how does the sport down here fulfil your expectations, Mr. Reigne?' asked the Count.

'I beg your pardon, Count. I did not notice you come in. The Princess here is raking me fore and aft. The sport? It is magnificent. I have never enjoyed anything so much in my life.'

'And what was your bag for the day? We have just been hearing how Signor Delsarti and Madame Adela accomplished a whole snipe between them. I hope you had, at all events, equal success.'

'Snipe!' said Basil. 'Oh, we leave the snipe to the young folks there. The Princess set her heart on bear to-day. We struck his tracks yesterday, and followed them up to-day. I think we 'll have him to-morrow.'

'Bear!' said the Count. 'You go for big game.'

'One naturally goes for the best obtainable. We got two wolves yesterday, and a boar the day before. Our star is rising, you see. Shouldn't be a bit surprised if we got a brigand before we have done. By the way, how do we stand as regards the law in case we meet the ferocious Constantine, Count? Is he to be shot on sight?'

'Shoot him by all means if you meet him. I have no doubt he will do as much for you if you try it and miss.'

'So! It 's as well to know the rules of the game, especially if the forfeit is so heavy. Shoot first, apologize afterwards—isn't that your style out West, Mr. Vandenbyl?'

'That 's so!' said Vandenbyl, rolling his cigar between his teeth, and cocking it up in the other corner of his mouth.

'And how are we to recognize the gentleman if we come across him, Alex?' asked the Princess plaintively. 'I have never had the pleasure of meeting him yet.'

'Well,' said the Count, contemplatively lighting a

cigarette, 'I will describe him carefully, so that you will know him when you do meet him. He is about my height. He has fair hair, and a moustache and beard cut *à la Prusse*. Fine features, something like mine, and jet black hair and pointed black beard——'

'But you said——' interrupted the Princess.

'He stands six feet six in his stockings,' continued the Count, waving the interruption aside, 'and is correspondingly broad of shoulder. Eye like an eagle—nose like a hawk. His hair and beard are red. He is below the middle height, but enormously strong in the arms and legs; and he dresses usually in a petticoat, and garters his stockings from shoe to knee.'

'I think we shall know him,' said the Princess resignedly. 'We will shoot at anything that garters its stockings from shoe to knee, and wears a petticoat. How absurd you are, Alex. You evidently know just as much about him as the rest of us.'

'Well, as I told Mr. Reigne the other day, I have had him pointed out to me four times in one day by four different men, each of whom said he knew him, and each time he was as different from the previous one as chalk is from cheese. Personally, I am inclined to believe in the personality of Constantine about as much as I believe in the personality of the devil.'

'Perhaps he is the devil,' ventured Vandenbyl.

'That is the view of the Turkish Government since he lifted another fat tax-gatherer over at Tertera.'

'A shot at the devil!' said Reigne. 'Big game!'

'A silver bullet with a dash of holy water is about the proper thing,' said Desrolles. 'I will melt you down a five-franc piece to-night, my dear Reigne. The holy water I regret I cannot provide. I do not use it'—as though it were a discredited toothpowder.

'He does not use holy water——' began Delsarti.

But the Melita checked him with her hand.

'Now don't begin again you two, and you shall have your song.'

'Bravo!' cried Desrolles.

'Bravissimo!' echoed Delsarti.

And she sang them 'Home, Sweet Home'—in perfect English, in that wonderful voice that had thrilled every civilized country, and had brought the whole world to her feet.

They had cried 'Bravo!' and 'Bravissimo!' before she began, but when the last full notes died lingeringly away there was silence, eloquent and profound, as though the souls of the listeners feared to lose the faintest echo of the golden tones.

Adela Melita's own eyes were sparkling with tears as she sang. Countess Anna bent down her head with working lips. Marie Obdanovitch silently extracted a tiny lace handkerchief, and scrupled not to dab her eyes with it, and under cover of the halma table Basil Reigne's hand stole towards her left hand, and touched it gently. He could not help it. He knew the sweet heart near him was overflowing at thought of this beautiful, homeless woman's interpretation of the glorious old song, and his heart went out to both of them. The warm little hand that he touched was not withdrawn, and the life within him thrilled till the pulses belled in his ears.

Count Alex pulled his moustache and examined the grain of the polished floor.

Desrolles and Delsarti sat open-mouthed, worshipfully.

The clustered servants in the doorways stole silently back to their work, and worked the better for their short divertation.

'Damned fine!' said Julius Vandenbyl at last, throwing away his dead cigar, when the silence had become painful. 'I 'm going to bed. I don't want anything to spoil the taste of that.'

But all the same he got no farther than the stair-

case leading up to the gallery, when he came back again and stood before the singer, and said, 'Madame Melita, if you will let me form you into a company, I will capitalize you for half a million dollars inside of ten days, and I will hand you half the amount of the stock as purchase money.'

'That is a very high compliment, Mr. Vandenbyl,' said Madame Melita sweetly, her eyes still shining, 'but I am engaged for a long time to come.'

'I 'll take over all running contracts,' said Vandenbyl.

She smiled and shook her head.

'Pity!' said the financier. 'There 's money in it, and no risk. I would insure you for the full amount against sickness, accident, or death. Can't be done, then?'

'Not at present, I thank you.'

And the disconsolate financier tramped away to bed and dreams of dollars illimitable.

'Adela, my dear,' said the Duchess, 'I heard Jenny Lind sing that song a score of times, but I never heard her sing it better than that. *Ay mi!* it is almost worth while having no home of one's own to be able to touch people's hearts like that.'

'Almost,' said the singer with a sigh, 'but not quite! The home is very much the better of the two.'

And just then, through the encircling screens, there came quietly in a tall dark man in a shooting-suit, with his travelling-cloak flung back over his shoulders, his cap in his hand, and his face full of the eager anticipation of his welcome. He had ridden up unheard, and walked quietly in at the front door, and waited behind the screens till the last echoes of the Melita's song had died away. It was the Archduke Franz Johann, and they all stood up to receive him.

'You see I have taken you at your word, Count,' he said. 'I left the yacht at Cattaro and struck

across country to Uskub, and then came on by rail to Zarnova. And it has been worth all the journey to hear "Home, Sweet Home" sung like that. May I be permitted to add my heartiest thanks, Madame Adela?' and he looked into her eyes with a look which drew responsive fire from hers.

Was it question and answer, or only the answer to a long-before-asked question, which passed in those ardent looks?

Basil wondered, and got a glimmering of the truth, and when he glanced at Princess Marie he found her gazing at those other two with widely beautiful eyes full of intense and eager sympathy. She felt his questioning look, and turned her bright face responsively upon him, and he read in it gladness, and satisfaction, and all the wondrous kindness of a warm fellow-feeling.

The Duchess, too, was watching Adela and the Archduke with a look in which eager questioning had given place to a quiet satisfaction, and, after warmly greeting the new arrival, she now sat with the air of one who has seen the finishing stroke put to a work in which she herself has borne no unprominent part.

The Archduke made himself very much at home. Countess Anna, after welcoming him, had gone at once to see herself to his material comfort, and when he returned with her from the meal she had had prepared for him, it was evident that he was in the highest of spirits, and intended to have a good time himself, and to assist every one else to have a good time too.

With Reigne, perhaps, from a perception of fellow-feeling, His Highness was more than cordial. They discussed the shooting and the country, and Franz Johann described to them his cruise and his journey across country, which had been a somewhat rough experience.

'By the way, Monsieur Reigne,' he said, among other things, 'Ellesmere and I were looking for you the other day in Vienna. He dropped off on his way down to Constantinople. Do you know, I met him again off the mouth of the Adriatic, and we had a delightful hour together. He was inquiring after you. What a splendid fellow he is! He was taking his ship out to join your Eastern Squadron. He had his boy with him, too, a fine little fellow, going to be just such another man as his father. Where do we shoot to-morrow, Count?'

'Reigne and the Princess have discovered the tracks of an alleged bear, your Highness. We thought of taking a look at them to-morrow, just to see if there really is any bear or if it is all an effort of imagination on the part of those young people.'

'Ah! bear is very good fun,' said the Archduke with sportsmanlike eagerness. 'How far did you follow him, Mr. Reigne? Right to his den?'

'Right to his den, your Highness, but we had no means of getting him out, and he declined to come of his own accord.'

'Well, we 'll get him to-morrow,' said Franz Johann, 'or we 'll know the reason why.'

On two only of the party did this new arrival exert a somewhat depressing influence, and of that he was quite unaware, and if he had been aware of it he could not have altered it. Messieurs Desrolles and Delsarti speedily awoke to the fact that their noses were very considerably disjointed by the presence of the Archduke. Not only had they to check the wild flow of their little spirits, which ran occasionally mountebankwards, but withal proved amusing to the onlookers, but in the special quarter where it pleased them to imagine their little hearts engaged they also found a sudden and unexpected check.

For His Highness, as though by some prescriptive right of which they were unaware, monopolized

Adela Melita's time and attention in a way that—'*Sacré nom de Dieu!*'—had in it all the germs and elements of a scandal, and was hardly to be suffered in silence, even though the chief offender were an Archduke, and a member of the reigning family. And as the days passed, they, not being by any means men's men, found the time dragging somewhat heavily on their hands. They made as though to transfer their unique little attentions to the Princess, but Basil Reigne was ready for them there, and headed them off in a way they could not pretend to mistake. So the two little carpet-warriors mingled their sighs with the smoke of many cigarettes, and swore tragically behind their carefully-trimmed little black moustaches, and wondered what the deuce the Archduke meant by it.

CHAPTER XXV

A SUDDEN SUMMONS

IT was the next evening after that on which the Melita had touched all their hearts with her song, and the Archduke had surprised them by his unexpected arrival, and the company was gathered again round the fire in the great hall of the Château.

Basil and the Princess had tracked their bear to his den again. The Archduke and the Count and the Austrians had joined the pursuit, leaving Desrolles and Delsarti and the rest to vent their energies on the smaller game of the lower slopes.

The bear, however, had retired to his inner sanctum and all their efforts to dislodge him had proved futile. They tried to stir him up with sticks and poles. They lighted a fire at the mouth of his cave to smoke him out. But he was evidently possessed of the large common-sense which not infrequently

goes with a retiring disposition. He reasoned within himself, no doubt, that the noisy people outside desired his visible presence more for their own gratification than for his, and so he stopped where he was, and they returned to the Château tired and empty-handed.

Desrolles affected to believe that the bear existed only in Reigne's imagination. Reigne invited him to come on the morrow and see for himself. Desrolles promised to go if Delsarti would go also, and after much humming and hawing and casting about to find what Madame Melita was going to do, he consented.

But fate stepped in to save the bear, for, while they were still discussing plans for his extermination, a rider came hot-foot from Zarnova with a despatch for Basil Reigne.

He begged permission to open it, and after reading it, said gloomily to the Count, 'They want me in Vienna.'

'I am sorry,' said Szarvas, though his natural imperturbability did not permit him to show it.

'You have fallen into the great mistake, my dear Reigne,' said Desrolles, 'of making yourself so very necessary that the Office can't get on without you. I did the same myself at first——' Here Delsarti coughed, and Desrolles fixed him with a serious and questioning eye.

'Any row on?' inquired Vandenbyl. 'Stocks likely to be affected?'

Basil consulted his telegram again, and knitted his brows over it, and then read slowly, 'War declared—Russia and Germany——' He glanced round the circle of eager faces—the men were sitting up as though their ears already caught the rattle of arms and the tramp of marching feet—the eyes of the Austrians were sparkling—Vandenbyl was on his feet on his way to his room to get his portmanteau

packed. But Marie Obdanovitch, whose face Basil delighted to think had clouded at news of his departure, caught the twinkle in his eye, and clapped her hands with a merry laugh. The Archduke, too, looked up from some remark of Adela's and laughed quietly to himself.

'Caught! every one of them,' cried the Princess gaily—'*poissons d'avril!* though it is rather late in the season. But must you really go, Mr. Reigne, or is that a joke too?'

'No, that is anything but a joke. I must go.'

'But you will return?'

'If it be at all possible.'

That night, when all the rest had retired, the Archduke and Basil Reigne remained long in earnest conversation. And when at last they rose to climb the stairs—

'You are quite sure the Pasha has horses to spare?' asked the Archduke.

'He has a dozen or more in his stables, and keeps a couple always ready for the road at a moment's notice.'

'Well, we must get across the hills somehow, and then beg his assistance. If he is the good fellow you think, he will not refuse it. We shall strike the railway at Yenideli and be in Corinth next day. We shall be quietly married there, and then leave at once in the yacht. I shall wire to Kessanly to be there within ten days from now. I particularly wish to avoid involving our friends here in the very slightest. It is bound to create some little disturbance among my people, but as I am not in the direct line it does not matter much, and in any case I count it all as nothing compared with Adela.'

'I wish your Highness every possible success and happiness.'

'You had better take a leaf out of our book and come too, Monsieur Reigne,' laughed Franz Johann.

'Unless I am much mistaken you would not get "No" for an answer.'

But Basil only shook his head with a heightened colour in his face.

'I shall ride with you into Zarnova in the morning. What time do you start?'

'I must be *en route* by six o'clock, your Highness.'

'Then the sooner we are in bed the better. *Bonne nuit*, and *au revoir, mon ami!*'

And before the house-party as a whole were awake next morning—there were exceptions, however, and they wore very charming morning wrappers—Basil Reigne and the Archduke were galloping along the road to Zarnova. Princess Marie had a headache and did not shoot that day.

Arrived at Vienna, Reigne, to his utter disgust, found that it was only Battlemont's incapacity and helplessness in the absence of the Chief which had caused the curtailment of his holiday. To Battlemont's nervous apprehension the Slivovitza affair looked like breaking out afresh, and as 'nobody but Reigne understood the ins and outs of it,' he had deemed it advisable to have Reigne on the spot in case of need.

Reigne used language so undiplomatic that it expressed exactly what he thought, and his face most undiplomatically expressed also exactly what he felt. He even went the length of suggesting to Viscount Battlemont that if he would accompany him over to a secluded spot in the Prater he would punch some small modicum of common-sense into his sleek, yellow head. At which Battlemont screwed his glass into his eye, and gazed at him in astonishment, and said, 'Deah boy, I only acted as I—er—thought for the best!' And Basil growled out that if he worked that brain of his too much he would feel the effects later on.

Two days sufficed to straighten out the little hitch

in the Slivovitza matter, and on the evening of the fourth Reigne trotted up to the old Château in the Rhodopes, and was received with a shout of welcome.

'Why, where 's the Count?' he asked, as they all met at dinner.

'He was called away the day after you left,' said the Countess. 'I think he has gone to Galicia. Mr. Vandenbyl went with him, on his way to Vienna. And our military friends had to go yesterday, as their leave had expired.'

When Basil Reigne recalls the next ten days he laughs to himself a low, happy laugh. What days they were!—days of glamour, and the intoxicating delights of newly awakened love—long days amid the glorious hills in a companionship that grew ever sweeter and sweeter, in an atmosphere that filled like new wine—in a pursuit that enforced a *camaraderie*, and permitted an insight into character, taste, and feeling, which years of the life of the cities could never have afforded.

And Marie Obdanovitch enjoyed it all to the full as much as Basil Reigne himself.

She was like a schoolgirl home for her first holiday.

In her neat and businesslike shooting costume she tramped and climbed with the best of them, and scarce a day passed but she and Basil found themselves, by the accidents of the chase, and perhaps something more, thrown together and apart, and forming a party of two. Marie was venturesome and full of spirit. She would halt and rest, and then strike off on some line of her own. And Basil, whose eyes were never off her long, would follow quietly and almost unconsciously, and presently they two would find themselves alone, and the laughing black eyes never said him nay.

And so their friendship ripened into intimacy and blossomed into love.

And, similarly apart, Adela Melita and the Arch-

duke Franz Johann worked out their own story in their own way, and quite to their own satisfaction.

And Desrolles and Delsarti found themselves left more in the cold than ever, but they never said a word about it, except to one another; not even when, later on, the inquisition into the matter was hot and strong, and their little contributions to the general fund would have gained them a quite unusual importance in their social circles. But in their curious little way they bore for Adela Melita a very strong and warm affection, and never a word passed their lips which might have cast even the shadow of a shadow on her good name.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PUZZLEMENT OF DAZHINSKY

BASIL REIGNE has often said that the Princess made love to him, and she always laughingly replies that her wooing *had* to be *en princesse*, or he would, in his insular pride, have spoiled both their lives. And truly it is no small thing for a second attaché to propose marriage to a princess with an income of five times as many thousands as he has hundreds a year.

However, this is how it came about.

Basil had got to the point at which every room was empty, however handsomely furnished and peopled, and every landscape a waste, howling wilderness, however glorious it might be with purple hills and silver streams, if Marie was not there. She was the soul of life to him, and without her the colour and flavour of all things faded, and existence became grey and insipid. Her glance thrilled him like an inspiration, the touch of her hand set his pulses jumping. He would have walked a hundred

miles barefoot to look into her eyes. He would have laid down his life to shield her from harm or insult. In a word, he loved her very deeply and very truly, and he never gave a thought to her millions except as a possible barrier to his hopes.

One evening these two, separated from the rest as usual, were finding their way home down the mountain sides, Basil carrying the guns, and Marie dangling the spoils of the chase from her arm—the tusks of a huge boar, and the tail of a wolf.

They reached the level and struck the road, and sat down to rest. Their intercourse had long since passed the necessity for talk. For Basil it was enough that Marie sat there beside him, that with a turn of the head the most glorious being in all the world would fill his vision. But he did not turn his head. The knowledge of her presence conveyed a keener, larger pleasure, the subtle influence of her silent proximity was an infinitely deeper and sweeter thing to him than the simple gratification of his sight.

So they sat in wordless commune, and watched the shadows chase the last rosy sunbeams up the peaks of the distant Balkans, and all the outside world became grey and sad. But in their two hearts the sunbeams lived, and the shadows had no place.

Basil's hand dropped softly on Marie's as it lay on the turf, and she did not withdraw it. It was the second time in his life that he had touched her without invitation. He knew all that her permission implied, and, strong man as he was, he drew a great breath, that was like a gasp of relief.

When the grey eyes turned they found the dark eyes all aglow with a new light that had never been in them before. He raised the little hand and kissed it reverently, as one kisses the Book when registering a vow. Then he rose and stood before her, and looked down upon the fairest sight the world had

ever yielded him—the sweet, upturned face of the woman he loved, with its gently tremulous lips, and a look of perfect trust and love in the swimming eyes.

And then, suddenly, there came the measured beat of marching feet, and a dark body of men came quickly along the white road. As they came abreast of Basil and the Princess, their leader called a halt, and, doffing his képi, came forward and put a question in a tongue which Basil could not understand, but which he supposed to be Bulgarian. The Princess said a word, and the officer immediately replied in French.

He asked if Madame could tell him where the Château Szarvas lay; and Basil informed him that it lay some way off the road, about a mile ahead.

'We are going there and will walk with you,' he added.

The officer expressed his pleasure, gave an order to his sergeant, and the men flung themselves down on the turf by the roadside.

'Now, Madame, at your pleasure, we will walk on. My men will be glad of a ten minutes' rest, and will catch us up before we get there,' and the three walked on together.

'I am going to beg the Count's hospitality for one night,' said the officer. 'I have not slept in a bed for ten days. No doubt he will also permit my men to bivouac in the courtyard or outhouses.'

'Assuredly,' said the Princess. 'The Count is away, but the Countess will make you welcome.'

'May I be permitted to introduce myself? I am George Dazhinsky, Captain of the 17th Regiment stationed at Philippopolis, at present on special duty.'

'This is the Princess Marie Obdanovitch, sister to the Countess Szarvas.' Dazhinsky bowed and murmured his delight. 'I am Basil Reigne, of the British Embassy at Vienna.' Dazhinsky bowed once more.

'You have been more fortunate in your hunting

than I have,' he said, with an appreciative glance at the boar tusks and the wolf's tail. 'For ten days past I have been patrolling these detestable mountains and have never even caught sight of the quarry.'

'And what were you hunting, M. le Capitaine?' queried the Princess.

'The King of the Brigands, Madame—the elusive Constantine.'

Reigne stopped, and regarded the captain with an amused laugh.

'The great Constantine is still at large, then?'

'Very much so, Monsieur.'

'And still lending the Government his friendly assistance in the collection of its revenues for his own personal benefit?'

'Exactly. He relieved the collector of the Tertera district of 20,000 florins just twelve days ago, and they sent me off with fifty men post-haste to try to catch him.'

'And you have fared no better than Gospadof.'

'Pardon, M'sieur——?'

'You have had no better success than Lieutenant Gospadof and his troop?'

The captain shook his head and turned a puzzled face to Reigne.

'I do not understand,' he said.

'You know Lieutenant Gospadof?'

'No, M'sieur.'

'Three weeks ago Gospadof and Count Szarvas and I were also ranging these mountains in search of Constantine. We also had fifty of your soldiers. Moreover, we had the assistance of a troop of fifty Turkish regulars——'

'*Sapristi!* So had we!'

'Under the command of Major—Bimbashi—h'm—I forget his name—an exceedingly stout little man.'

Captain Dazhinsky had come to a dead stop, and

was regarding Basil with wide-eyed astonishment, his eyebrows up in the roots of his hair.

'We also met a troop of fifty Turkish regulars and they joined us in the search. They were under the command of Chakri Pasha.'

'The deuce they were! Chakri must have been pretty badly roasted at Constantinople to make him turn brigand-hunter.'

'Yes; he did not seem to take to it very kindly.'

They had reached the point where the road leading to the Château parted from the highway, and the metronomic beat of the soldiers' feet announced their approach.

Dazhinsky halted them a short distance from the Château, while he went forward with the Princess and Basil to request the Countess's hospitality for himself and his men. This was readily accorded, and captain and private alike had reason to congratulate themselves on having stumbled upon such comfortable quarters.

Dazhinsky proved quite a welcome addition to the house-party. He had travelled, was well read, and had been on intimate terms with Prince Alexander. He talked well, and evidently enjoyed his return to the amenities of civilization and society. Yet withal he wore an air of puzzled perplexity, and his brows knitted constantly over some problem that was troubling him, and his eyes, whenever they met Basil Reigne's, were full of questioning.

The Archduke interrogated him closely as to the route he and his men had taken and the parts of the mountains they had scoured, and seemed satisfied with the answers he received.

When the ladies had retired for the night, and the men sat with their last cigars over the big wood fire in the hall, Dazhinsky lingered on till the Archduke and Desrolles and Delsarti had yawned themselves away to their rooms, then he drew up his chair

alongside Reigne, who had foreseen that this must be so, and said abruptly—

'Now, Monsieur Reigne, let us get to the bottom of this. You say that you, and the Count Szarvas and Lieutenant Gospadof, and fifty Bulgarian regulars were searching these mountains three weeks ago for Constantine?'

'That is so.'

'Where did you meet this Gospadof?'

'I had been stopping with Chakri. The Turkish troops came past his place on their way to the mountains, and Chakri begged me to accept their escort till I could find my way to Vilova, as I had promised to join the Count's party here. We met Count Szarvas with Gospadof and his troop in the mountains. The two parties joined and patrolled together. After three days the Count and I got tired of it, as there was not a sign of a brigand, so we left the troops and came on here.'

'*Mille diables!* May I be crucified if I understand it!'

'Understand what, Captain? I see something is puzzling you, but I don't understand what.'

'There is no Gospadof, Monsieur Reigne! The only Gospadof there ever was on the rolls was my own particular chum, Paul Gospadof, of Loftscha, and he was killed by my side at Slivnitza. He was favourite aide to Alexander, and we buried him on the field. Now what do you make of it?'

It was Reigne's turn to be amazed.

'I cannot be mistaken in the name. I lived in his company for three days. The Count and he seemed to be on terms of the closest intimacy. In fact, I judged them to be old friends.'

'Moreover,' said Dazhinsky slowly and impressively, 'no troop whatever except my own has been detailed for special service after Constantine—that I know for an absolute fact.'

'Steady!' said Reigne. 'You are making my brain spin. Where are we getting to?'

'I'm hanged if I know. There is something deucedly queer about all this,' and the two men sat and smoked and looked at one another, and puzzled after the answer to their riddle.

'Where is Count Szarvas? He could possibly throw some light on the matter,' said Dazhinsky.

'I had to go to Vienna for three days. The Count was called away before I returned—to Galicia, I believe.'

'H'm!—Well, it beats me! There is some mistake somewhere, or else there is something wrong. I'm going to bed.'

CHAPTER XXVII

IN THE TOILS

NEXT morning Captain Dazhinsky marched away with his men, and Basil Reigne and Princess Marie set out for a mountain walk. They would not shoot that day. Their minds were tuned to better things, and if the old brown bear himself had crossed their path they would not have had a word to say to him. So they took nothing with them but climbing-poles, and a light luncheon in Basil's shooting-bag.

It was a glorious day—to them the brightest day that had ever dawned. They wandered on and on, mounting higher and higher, saying little, but thinking and looking much.

They came at last to a boulder-strewn valley, where the crests of the hills seemed to have come tumbling down in ruins and covered the earth with gigantic and unsightly fragments.

Wandering among these they lighted upon a little

green chamber, carpeted with velvet turf, and almost enclosed by great granite slabs. A tiny brook trickled in at one end and out at the other. It was too inviting to pass by.

'Here is Nature's own invitation to the most beautiful woman in the world to be seated and have lunch,' said Basil, and they passed in.

. . . . . .

He was lying at her feet. He gently took her hand again and kissed it.

'You permit me, Marie?'

'Obviously,' said the Princess, smiling down on him.

'With all that it implies?'

'With all that it implies.'

Then he knelt and kissed her on the lips.

'Dearest!' he said, looking deep into the beautiful eyes all aglow with the light that had never been in them before, 'life without you would be very grey and empty—and with you!—My God!'—and he bent again, and sealed their compact with kisses which left her no faintest shadow of a fear that he loved her for anything but herself alone.

They drifted into quiet happy talk of the future.

'What about your people?' at length asked Basil.

A tiny shrug and the most delightful of little *moues* was the response.

'My property is absolutely my own when I am twenty-one, and I am twenty-one in three days from now. Brother-in-law Alex's little plans don't look like coming to a head within that time.'

'And what were the Count's little plans?'

'He has been trying to induce me to marry his brother Rudolf for the last two years. Rudolf Szarvas is a boor and a barbarian, with whom no decent woman would associate. I would die first.'

'And how would the Count benefit by marrying you to Rudolf?'

'I can only guess that he has some hold upon his brother. I know nothing.'

A piercing whistle cleft the silence of the soft summer air, and without an instant's warning, in the blink of an eye, the little granite enclosure was filled with men, all armed to the teeth with knives and pistols and long-barrelled carbines.

Basil sprang up and struck out right and left, and those nearest him went down like ninepins. He caught one glimpse of Marie's white face and startled eyes, then he saw a blanket flung over her head, and she was borne off by a couple of stalwart ruffians.

He was keeping a dozen of them at bay. They hurled themselves on him like hounds on a cornered stag, and his sledge-hammer blows sent them spinning back bruised and bloody. He just had time to wonder why they did not shoot him down, when one with a badly bashed nose and half his teeth sputtering in his mouth, whirled his long carbine round by the barrel and brought the stock down with a crushing blow on the back of Basil's head.

He dropped like a felled ox. The victors flung themselves panting on the ground, and swore at the prostrate figure, and those nearest kicked it. Then they took his watch and chain and everything else of value, and with more kicks and more curses they made ready to carry him away with them.

But at that there arose a great dispute among them. For two of their number, one of them being the man with the battered face, whose blow had brought Basil to the ground, flatly refused to permit this. And while the others maintained that their instructions were to carry the Englishman up into the hills, these two still more vehemently asserted that they had received special instructions as to his

disposal, and they intended to carry out those instructions even though they had to fight all the rest in order to do so.

The quarrel waxed so bitter that they came within measurable distance of turning their guns on one another. But at last, amid a storm of curses at the contumacy of the rigid two, the majority drew off and trailed away up the mountain side, leaving the cause of all the trouble still lying unconscious on his face where he had fallen.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE ADVANTAGES OF A FOOTBALL TRAINING

WHEN Reigne came to his senses the sun was westering. His head was humming like a beehive, and he felt sick and sore and bruised all over. He lay on his side-face where he had fallen, his head almost in the little brook that purled noisily through the enclosure. His opening eyes fell on the figures of the two stalwarts who had remained in charge of him.

They were swarthy, black-browed ruffians armed to the teeth. They sat in the shade with their backs against the rocks, one enjoying a cigar from Reigne's own case which lay on the ground by his side, the other still spitting out blood and curses from his swollen lips and dismantled mouth. The sight of it acted as balm to the wound in the back of Reigne's head, and he experienced a certain satisfaction in knowing that as between man and man he had not had entirely the worst of it.

His neck was stiff and hard with the blood which the sun had caked into a thick plaster, and under the circumstances nothing better could have been done for him.

He would have liked to feel what amount of damage had been done, but his hands were bound tight behind his back. He managed to wriggle his body up to the brook, and plunged his aching head into it, and took a long delicious draught.

The man with the damaged mouth started up with a splutter of oaths to drag him back, but the other growled out a word or two, and he sat down muttering objurgations.

And then Reigne recognized him. It was the ruffian he had already met twice before under circumstances which did not now commend themselves as likely to prejudice him in his favour—the man of the Bosphorus and of the Turkish village on the road to Teraklia—though somehow it seemed to Reigne, as he lay and watched him, that he was less active and full-blooded than of yore, and that he bore himself stiffly, after the manner of one who carries an unhealed wound. And at sight of his lowering face the prisoner made up his mind that things would go ill with him, seeing into whose hands he had fallen. His other captor he did not recognize, and he wondered vaguely, with his head all swimming, what it all meant, and how these things came about, and at whose instigation it was that this man had so pertinaciously followed him and tried for his life ; and, with dull surprise, how, under such circumstance, he came to be still alive.

When the Undamaged One had finished his cigar, he slipped the case into his pocket and stood up. He intimated to Reigne that it was time to be moving by prodding him with the butt of his long carbine, and Broken Mouth emphasized the same by a couple of well-planted kicks.

They laughed for a minute at the prisoner's attempts to rise, then the Undamaged One took him by the collar and jerked him to his feet. His head was swimming still, and he reeled and stumbled. It

occurred to him that the weaker he seemed the less his guards might expect of him, and that thereby chance of escape might offer. So he made himself as limp as possible, and when they had fitted a rope round his neck the procession started, the Undamaged One leading with a twist of the rope round his wrist, Broken Mouth bringing up the rear with his long knife, and every now and again administering a vicious jab with the point to the prisoner who staggered brokenly between them.

With a pang Reigne saw that they turned off to the left, the opposite direction to that in which Marie had been carried. They tramped heavily along the hillside and then began to strike upwards.

As well as he could, without exciting suspicion, he took note of the course they were taking. His mind was made up to come back this same way as soon as opportunity offered. And as it was evident that the less distance they went the shorter distance he would have to return, he grew limper and limper, and kept stopping and hanging heavily on to the rope, in spite of angry jerks from the front and spiteful prods from the rear. His guards both swore lustily at him, but neither oaths nor jerks nor prods had any effect on his apparently failing strength.

It was a trying climb at best of times, and not without danger, the rough trail winding round the bare hill shoulders, with critical bits here and there, where the rocks rose sheer on the one side and fell away sharp and sudden on the other, and where a false step might send them down a hundred feet on to the ragged boulders below. Reigne felt, with a grim, fleeting humour, that while there was not much fear of his falling into any abyss with that rope round his neck, it would still be his neck that would suffer if the leader tripped and fell over, and that so he bore a double burden of responsibility.

He went heavily and still more heavily, till the

rope nearly choked him, and at last, arriving at a spot where a big rock jutted over the path and offered almost the shelter of a cave, the leader took the rope from the prisoner's neck, bound his legs and arms with it, and bade him sit down. Then Broken Mouth gathered sticks and made a tiny fire, and boiled water in a flat tin dish which formed part of his equipment, and with a few handfuls of meal made a thin porridge of which he and the other partook.

If it had rested with Broken Mouth, Reigne would have gone fasting, for he was closing the commissariat and putting away his cooking utensils, when the Undamaged One growled out a word or two, and the other flamed out an excited and phosphorescent series of objections to feeding a — — — who had sent half one's teeth down one's throat. The dispute waxed hot, and it was only a threat on the part of the Undamaged One, which he emphasized with his gun, to drive the remaining teeth after their fellows, that procured Reigne his supper. Broken Mouth, to save his remaining teeth, gave way to the extent of dashing a handful of meal into the tin dish full of water and slamming it on the ground in front of the prisoner, who rolled over and lapped it up as best he could. Boil it, Broken Mouth would not, teeth or no teeth, and the Undamaged One was satisfied so long as the prisoner was kept alive. He himself contributed his mite to the hilarity of the occasion by sitting to windward of the prisoner and smoking one of his cigars, and permitting him to enjoy its fragrance at second hand. He grinningly offered one to Broken Mouth, but his swollen lips were still too painful, and he refused it and flung an extra curse at the prisoner. They conversed in a mixed patois, Greek, Bulgarian, Turkish, all jumbled up, and Reigne could occasionally catch the drift of their talk, though he could not make much of it.

'Why not kill him and have done with him?' he

thought he caught Broken Mouth growling one time.

'Because, my Ahmed, revenge may be very sweet to you,' said the other, or something to that effect, 'but to me money is sweeter still.'

'Half your teeth aren't down your throat,' growled Broken Mouth again.

'No, fortunately for him,' said the other, nodding towards Basil. 'If they had been he would not be here. But as it is, maybe we can get both ransom and revenge.'

'What will he fetch?'

The other laughed out some idiomatic expression which was Bulgarian to Reigne, but he caught stray words and bits of pantomime which were by no means pleasant or reassuring, '—a finger . . . say an ear . . . another finger . . .' and so on.

'And the girl?'

'Ah! that is a different matter, my Toothless One. Now you are trenching on matters which don't concern you. If I know the Chief aright, her figure will be a high one—*pfui*—millions! She is the richest woman in Europe, they say, but there is more in that matter than shows outside, I imagine.' Then he trailed off into a turgid flood of mixed jargon, and Reigne could only catch an occasional word, of which he could make nothing.

In the course of his talk he referred to the prisoner more than once, indicating him by a backward jerk of the head, but Reigne's brain was still humming, and he could make no sense of it, and at last, in spite of wounds and bonds and chill night air, he dozed off.

He was awakened by a blow in the face from Broken Mouth, who adopted this familiar method of intimating that breakfast was ready, and that it was time to start. The Undamaged One was not in sight, but he came swinging round the corner as the prisoner finished lapping up his last grains of meal.

He untied the rope from his cramped legs, fitted it round his neck, and with a jerk started the procession once more.

Daylight was just breaking over the hills as they set out. The valleys were still swathed in shadows and curling mists. And now, limp and stiff and broken though he felt, Reigne concentrated all his faculties on the idea of escape. Every yard they went took him that much farther from Marie ; every minute she was in the hands of the brigands was additional torture to him. So he bore as heavily on his neck-rope as he could, and used his eyes and bided his time, determined on a full settlement of accounts the first chance that offered.

It came sooner than he had hoped.

The path still tended upwards, and wound narrowly round sharp, out-jutting elbows of rock. More than once, as they accomplished a difficult and risky turning, Reigne ground his teeth and said to himself that that would have done. Glancing ahead from under his brow, he saw an unusually difficult bit coming. He set his jaw tight and braced himself for battle. Outwardly he seemed pumped, the rope was tight round his neck, the sharp point behind was pinking him with punctures.

The moment came, and the spot—sheer rock on one side, sheer fall the other. He gathered himself, straightened himself, and like a flash spun round on one leg, bringing the other outstretched whirling against the legs of unsuspecting Broken Mouth. It was a leg of iron, well matured on the football fields at home ; it was pitted with smarting wounds from Broken Mouth's vicious blade, and it swept the legs of that worthy from under him as if they had been matches. Yelling and scrabbling and clutching, he started his descent, but when he landed on the rocks two hundred feet below he was silent.

And he had not lain there one minute when the

Undamaged One joined him—undamaged no longer. For at the jerk of the rope he turned to see what was happening, and as he turned he received Reigne's head full in the stomach. The rope slid through his lax fingers as he shut up like a pocket-knife and joined Broken Mouth—now Broken Head, Broken Ribs, Broken Body—on the silent rocks below.

And Basil Reigne up above, panting hard and trembling with excitement, sat down on the path lest another should be added to the feast for eagles down below. For, even as he looked, a great bird, with wide-sweeping wings and craning neck, came circling down out of the unknown, swept past him so close that the glance of its evil eye sent a chill down his spine, and dropped down into the abyss.

Basil sat tight on the narrow path till the first nervous strain was over. Then he crept to his feet, and finding with little difficulty a sharp edge of rock, backed up to it till the tooth of it played on the cord that bound his hands, and with five minutes' work and the loss of some cuticle he was free.

He hove five big rocks at the eagle flapping over its prey down below, missed every shot, then turned and swung down the path he had mounted with so much difficulty and in such different case in the dawn.

Before the sun was half-way up the sky he was back at the rock-encircled hollow through which the stream sang merrily. He drank of it and rested, and then took up the most difficult part of his task.

CHAPTER XXIX

WHAT THE CAVERN TOLD

HE was desperately hungry, and when he chanced on some scraps of their yesterday's lunch trodden into the turf, he picked them out as care-

fully as if they had been diamonds, and devoured them, dirt and all, with the eagerness of a starving dog. Then he set to work to find out in which direction they had carried the Princess.

At first the trail was easy. Having no fears of pursuit the brigands had taken no precautions, and so long as the ground was soft and receptive Reigne could follow at a run. He could even distinguish, or thought he could, the heavier footmarks of the rascals who carried Marie between them. But as the track struck upwards, and led among patches of shaly rock which tinkled like metal under his feet, he was constantly losing the indications, and had to make wide casts around before he found them again. At times he was on the point of despair, but ever, in one way or another, he managed to pick up the traces again, and so climbed higher and higher up the rugged side of the mountain.

At last, however, in an immense stony plateau he found himself completely at fault. The tracks led into it plainly enough, but they never seemed to lead out again. A dozen shingly paths ran from it. It was a great shingly sea with a dozen shingly rivers streaming into and out of it, and up any one of these the band might have gone. Whichever path he chose might be the wrong one, and every step would but lead him farther and farther from the chase. To explore them all would take a week. He took first a rapid tramp round each outlet, his eyes glued to the ground for the faintest indications—and found nothing. Then he began systematically to follow each path for a short distance. This was slow work, and the sun had long since passed the zenith, but he stuck to it doggedly. Once or twice his spirits rose as he came across distinct traces of shod feet—and fell lower than ever when he found the traces were his own.

He was getting desperate, and stood idly kicking

with his heel the stones of the third path he had explored, and consigning the wily brigands to long-continued torment, when a tiny gleam caught his eye. He pounced upon it—a ring—a ring set with rubies and diamonds—one of Marie's rings, he had seen it often on her finger. With a smothered whoop he turned up the path and went steadily along at a trot, his eye searching keenly for further leads. The shingly path trailed off at last into softer ground, and here the footmarks of the troop were plain enough, and he sped along in high spirits. What the end of the chase might be did not trouble him. Time enough to make plans when he saw how the land lay.

And now, far away in front, as he passed through a rocky cleft, rose a great ridge of the mountain, running as near as he could tell due east and west. The sun was already dipping towards it as he drew near.

It seemed to him to be a mighty plateau, flat as a table on top, and the side fell sheer and straight as the side of a house to the plain along which his path lay. The way must lie along the foot of the cliff, which he could see was strewn with huge boulders, or into the heart of it, for the sides were absolutely unscalable.

If this should be one of the brigands' haunts, no doubt a good look-out would be kept, and no one could follow the path over the plain without being visible for miles to any such sentinel. He deemed it wise, therefore, to wait for darkness before attempting the passage of the plain. So he climbed up a hundred feet from the path, chose a hiding-place among the rocks, and lay looking out over the plain towards the plateau.

He was desperately fagged and ravenously hungry. Beyond two handfuls of meal and the broken scraps of the enclosure he had eaten nothing for twenty

hours. But in spite of this, and the torture of anxiety as to Marie's fate, Nature would have her way, and the sun had barely dropped behind the plateau when his eyes closed, and he fell asleep.

He woke with a start, and a curse at his stupidity, to find all dark about him, and nothing to guide him even to the path he had to follow. He shook himself together and was preparing to scramble downhill, when the sound of voices below and the clink of arms dropped him down behind his rock again. A small body of armed men was passing beneath him in the direction of the cliff.

He slipped off his boots and dropped noiselessly down till he struck the path, and crept along in their wake.

He had no difficulty in keeping within touch of them, for they laughed and joked in the highest spirits, and their arms clinked merrily. It was dark as pitch, but their feet trod the accustomed path without a stumble, and Basil Reigne in his stockings crept silently behind.

But at the end of a half-hour's steady tramp they all fell silent, the voices were hushed, and their arms, carried carefully, gave forth no sound. The path wound among gigantic boulders. As Reigne crept quietly round one of these, his heart leapt into his mouth at finding, from the low growl of conversation almost in his ear, that the party he had been following was all sitting down behind it, on the other side facing towards the cliff.

He thanked Heaven for his stockinged feet, and stood breathless, leaning against the path side of the same rock. Then, with infinite caution, he withdrew inch by inch, chose another rock some distance away, and lay down behind it and patiently awaited events.

He could hear the low, intermittent growl of talk and an occasional smothered laugh, and now and again an impatient snarl from the rock in front. He

was getting cramped and tired, and was wondering how long this was to continue, when a footstep approaching from the cliff set them all on the alert.

The new-comer approached quietly, then stood and gave a soft whistle. It was answered from the party behind the rock, and he joined them swiftly and sat down with the rest. Reigne could catch eager questions and answers, and an occasional low growl of laughter. Then silence fell on them again, and they sat and waited.

Another footstep from the cliff,—again the halt,—the low signal whistle and answer,—and another new-comer joined the waiting band. And this was repeated till Reigne judged there must be at least twenty armed men squatting silently behind the rock.

Gradually the intermittent talk died away. All eyes and ears were straining towards the cliff. The heavy silence and the dense darkness were pregnant with possibilities, as a thunder-cloud is charged with electricity.

They waited and waited, till Reigne wondered that the thumping of his heart was not heard behind the other rock. There is nothing so trying to the nerves as a long, silent wait with great possibilities in front. Bad enough in field of fight, when men lie waiting the word with grinding teeth and tight-strung nerves, and their emotions oozing out of them in unrecorded oaths and curses and other various ways, while the bullets whistle home to their billets. Ten times worse this waiting in the silence and the dark.

That something unusual was toward was evident, but what it might be was quite beyond Reigne's comprehension.

And so they waited.

Then at last came the flash that broke the long suspense. A plume-like bead of light at the foot

of the cliff waved rapidly to and fro, and instantly, in response, the armed band sprang from its crouching place and raced towards the spot where the torch still flashed up and down.

Reigne followed three yards behind, stumbling and bruising feet and knees, keeping the path as well as he could, and thankful that, owing to his stockinged feet and the eagerness of those in front, his falls were unheard. When he reached the face of the cliff the last of the band was just disappearing through a narrow cleft formed by a great leaning boulder.

Basil took his life in his hands and followed without a moment's hesitation. It was dark as Erebus. His head bumped against the rocks, and he had to feel his way with his hands. He heard footsteps dying away to the right, and his blind hands, falling on space, discovered a passage. He bent his head and stumbled along, his hands outstretched on either side. In places one or other of the side walls broke away, and he had to grope along by whichever wall served.

Then, in front, there rose a sudden wild uproar—hoarse cries, and shots, and yells, and all the sounds of deadly strife.

What it all might mean Basil had not the faintest idea. So far as he could make out the brigands were attacking their own stronghold. But why and wherefore was quite beyond his imagining. He stood for a moment, hesitating whether wisdom and safety alike did not dictate a speedy retreat from this inferno.

But the matter was decided for him.

For suddenly the tide of battle came rolling down the passage towards where he stood. He groped hastily for one of the gaps in the side wall, and was grateful for its depth. He scrambled in among the rocks, and crouched and waited, and in a moment the

tunnel was full of men fighting fiercely for their lives, stabbing and yelling, now making a stand and falling back foot by foot, and then swept along in a howling heap by the fierce rush of those behind.

Now and again a pistol cracked, and lit up the scene with a lightning flash, but it was mostly cold steel and pistol butts, and as the rush swept by, the ground was strewn with groaning, cursing men.

Basil groped his way down again to the level, and stumbled along up the passage. The uproar behind gradually died away as the fight burst out into the open. He trod on wounded men, and they cursed him and clutched at him blindly and savagely. He tripped over a carbine. He picked it up and pushed on.

A dim light ahead broke gratefully on his straining eyes. The passage suddenly opened out into a vast cavern. The light came from a couple of torches stuck into the rock at the far end. Beneath the torches was a table spread with food and wine, and behind the table, on the ground, just as he had fallen from his seat, was a dead man. And bending over the dead man in silent agony was a woman, a dark-haired, olive-skinned woman, dressed in Bulgarian costume, with a bright kerchief wound round her head, and strikingly handsome, though her face was warped with grief and passion.

'Marie!' shouted Basil, and the bending woman raised her head and looked at him for a moment with eyes full of angry fire, and the dark gleaming face seemed somehow familiar to him.

'Basil! Basil!' came faintly from inside a rude wooden door which closed the entrance to a smaller apartment, and a pair of tiny fists hammered on it in frantic excitement.

A lusty kick staved in the door, and Marie sprang into his arms.

'Thank God!' he said. 'Let us get out of this! They will be back.'

He went to pluck down one of the torches, and passed behind the table to get it.

'Good God!' he whispered hoarsely, and stood with hand outstretched as though turned to stone. 'What is this?' and Marie was by his side in a moment.

'It is Chakri—Chakri Pasha!' he said, pointing to the dead face above which the red fez still rested.

But Marie, looking down on the dead man, shuddered so violently that when he threw his arm round her, her shaking shook him too, and she gasped brokenly—

'O Basil, what does it mean? What does it all mean? Take me away! It is the Count, it is Alex!'

Then the woman looked up at them, with eyes ablaze with curses, and said some words in Bulgarian, and Marie shrieked and would have fallen.

Basil wound his arm more tightly round her, and she sobbed—

'Oh, take me away! Take me away!'

'What does she say?'

'She says it is her husband—Constantine!'

Basil half dragged, half carried her towards the tunnel. Another body lay in their path. Basil heeded it not. He was in haste to get out. He had got all he wanted, and more. But a wild clutch at his arm, and another moan from Marie, caused him to glance at the dead man.

'Good Lord!' he said, 'Gospadof! What in Heaven's name does it all mean? Are we going crazy?'

But Marie was sobbing hysterically, and only gasped out—

'It is Rudolf—Rudolf Szarvas! Take me away, quick!'—and he dragged her into the tunnel.

The passage of the tunnel haunts their dreams still. It was an inferno, slippery with blood and echoing still with groans and curses.

Marie fainted outright. Basil set his teeth hard, got his left arm well round the slender body, and staggered along, slipping and stumbling, now shrinkingly on soft human flesh which gave forth moans, now thankfully on silent solid rock again, bruising himself sorely, but carefully guarding his precious burden, till at last he smelt the cool night air.

He flung down the torch, and on his knees crept round the angle of the rock, dragged the Princess through the cleft, and fell prone, panting and spent.

He heard shots and shouts, more and more distant. The flight and pursuit had passed out of the plain and down along the hillside.

But there was no time to lose. He scrambled to his feet again, raised the Princess in his arms, and staggered off along the base of the cliff. He went till his strength gave out, then let his burden slide to the ground, and reeled and fell beside her.

When he came to it was still dark, but the rawness of the air told of the coming day.

A cold little hand was stroking his forehead, and he lay still to enjoy the caressing touch of it. He could have lain there for ever. But there was work to be done, so he moved his head and kissed the little hand in its passage, and sat up.

It was a very pale, dishevelled, heavy-eyed Princess that sat there, and, even as he looked, a convulsive sob shook her, and she buried her face in her hands.

'O Basil, I cannot forget it. What does it all mean?'

'I cannot tell, dear, yet. Something ghastly, I fear. . . . Are you quite sure——?'

'Oh, I am sure, quite sure,' she sobbed. 'He had changed himself, but I knew him. And—besides—

there was Rudolf. Oh, my poor Anna! *Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!* My poor, poor Anna!'

'I must see to your safety first, then I will try to find out what it means. Meanwhile, when we get home, if we ever do get home, the less we say of these things the better.'

'Yes, surely! Oh, my poor, poor Anna!'

'Can we find water? I am dying of thirst. I would give a year's pay—I almost believe I would give one single hair of your head, Marie—for a jugful of water.'

'Come, let us go,' she said, 'let us go home,' and hand in hand they stole away among the shadows that still hung round the base of the cliff.

. . . . . .

It was evening when Basil and the Princess limped painfully up the approach to the Château, half-dead with hunger and fatigue.

Countess Anna, full of anxious concern, carried off Marie to her room, and Desrolles and Delsarti gathered round Basil, eager for his news.

'My dear fellows, I have eaten nothing for thirty-six hours. If you want to know what it feels like, go and try it.'

And not another word would he say.

He wrote two lines on a scrap of paper, and sent for the steward.

'Get your very best horse and your very best man. He must follow Captain Dazhinsky, wherever he is, and put that note into his own hand as speedily as possible. Now give me food.'

He ate like a starving man, tumbled into a hot bath, tied a wet towel round his burning head, slept without a break for twenty-four hours, and woke refreshed.

CHAPTER XXX

THE GREAT UNRAVELLING

HIS opening eyes fell on the set, white, cameo face of the Duchess of Malplaquet, who sat by his bedside watching and waiting.

'I would not disturb you, my boy!' she said, 'but I have waited long for you to awaken. Tell me all that has happened. It is something terrible, I know. Marie is in a high fever.' Basil sat up quickly as though about to spring out of bed.

'You can do nothing more than has been done, my dear! We have a doctor here from Zarnova. He says she has had some great shock.'

'And the Countess?' asked Basil hurriedly. 'Is she attending her?'

'No!' said the Duchess, eyeing him keenly. 'I have seen to that. I am nursing her myself. She is sleeping just now. My maid will call me the moment she wakes. I think you had better tell me what has happened. The whole truth will be better, perhaps, than the half-truths I could not help gathering from Marie's wandering words. You don't want Anna to go near her?'

'Not on any account,' he said. 'If you will give me ten minutes to dress I will tell you all about it.'

'I will go and see how Marie is, and give you the latest news.'

Basil made a hasty toilet, and the tap-tap of the old lady's stick heralded her return as he finished.

'How is she?' he inquired anxiously.

'She is still sleeping. The doctor administered a sedative. He says there is no cause for anxiety. It is a question of time and careful nursing, and that

she will have. Now tell me, how do matters stand between you two?' and she eyed him anxiously.

'Marie has promised to be my wife.'

'*Dieu merci!* that is as I hoped it would be! You will, however, have to overcome the Count's opposition,' and her eyes, big with questioning, held his intently.

'No,' said Basil gravely. 'That is at an end.'

'How at an end? Does he know? And has he consented? And what about Rudolf?'

Basil eyed her for a moment, still half hesitating, then—

'You had better hear the whole story, Duchess. We shall need your best assistance and advice. The matter will be safe in your keeping, I know, for the love you bear Marie and the Countess.'

'Safe, my boy? Yes, it will be safe with me. I carry greater secrets than the Szarvas family is likely ever to evolve. *Allons!*'

'It is a very terrible story. Count Alex is dead—Chakri Pasha is dead—Constantine the Brigand is dead—they were all one and the same!'

'*Oh, Grand Dieu!*' she gasped, startled in spite of herself. Then her thoughts flew at once to the Countess. 'And Anna? *Oh, mon Dieu, mon Dieu!* Poor, poor Anna! I was sure Alex was dead, from Marie's talk. But this—this is—infamy!'

When she calmed down, Basil briefly told her the story.

'Rudolf too!' she exclaimed, lifting shaking hands of amazement.

'Now you see why the Countess must be kept away from Marie until she regains her senses. You and Madame Melita must manage it somehow, and as soon as possible you must all get away to Vienna. I have sent for Dazhinsky to return with his men. When he comes, if it is safe for me to leave Marie, I will go with them to the cave, and if I can, I will

bury the whole hideous thing out of sight for all time.'

'Yes, yes, go! You can do nothing here, and we must think of Anna. Could you not bury the body and tell her he was killed helping you to rescue Marie?'

'You forget—there is another woman in the case. The body I saw she claims as that of her husband Constantine. I know it to be Chakri Pasha, and Marie is certain it was Alexander Szarvas. If the woman has not already buried him, he can only be buried as the brigand. It is quite certain she knows nothing of the Countess, and the Countess must hear nothing of her, except as the wife of Constantine. Better she should hear nothing at all. I must be guided by what I find up there. I shall find the solution of several things that have been puzzling me, I expect, in that cavern, if we are able to get in at all. You must try to keep the other men from accompanying us.'

'I will see to that. I can manage them,' said the Duchess. 'There are only Desrolles and Delsarti.'

'Ah! The Archduke has gone?'

'Yes,' said the old lady briefly.

'And taken Madame Adela?'

'You knew, then?' she asked.

'Yes; he discussed his plans with me.'

'Yes, they have gone,' she said, with a wistful sigh. 'I do hope they will be happy.'

'I am quite sure they will,' he said.

Twelve hours later Dazhinsky galloped up the drive. He had taken the man's horse and left his troop to follow with the sergeant.

'Well, Monsieur Reigne, you have news?'

'Yes, I have news. Come up to my room.'

Basil briefly outlined the adventures of the Princess and himself, and told him of the death of Constantine,

but said no word of Chakri, nor of Alexander and Rudolf Szarvas, nor of ' Gospadof.'

' I can, I think, lead you to the cave, and you may as well clear out the remainder of the band, if there are any of them left. There are several things I want to know, and you will have the satisfaction of having done what you set out to do.'

For once, when she attempted to keep Desrolles and Delsarti at home, the Duchess found her will set at naught, and her express wishes disregarded.

Were not Madame Melita and the Archduke amissing since the day before yesterday, captured without doubt by the brigands as Reigne and Princess Marie had been, and were Desrolles and Delsarti to miss such a chance of succouring her ? Not for a moment ! As soon as they heard of the proposed expedition they expressed their intention of joining it, and scoffed at the idea of being left behind. It pleased these two to pose as fantastic *farceurs* at times, but, after all, they were men of birth, and possessed the instincts of their race and position. They dropped their fantasies like a mask, and instantly volunteered for service. They could not understand Reigne's attempts to dissuade them from the expedition, and mightily resented them.

Basil's tongue was of course very considerably tied. He dared say but little, lest he should say, or by his manner express, too much. Their presence trebled all his anxieties, but go they would, and he had no sufficient reason to offer why they should not.

It was bad enough to have to disclose the grim secret to the Duchess, but if these others stumbled upon it, as they almost inevitably must, concealment would be next to impossible. They themselves might perhaps be put on parole in the matter, but their first exclamations of surprise would surely open the eyes of Dazhinsky and his men.

He was tempted to give up the expedition, but

even that would now give rise to questioning and suspicion. There seemed nothing for it but to go through with it, and trust to chance and his quick wit to keep the secret safe, and this he was determined to do at all hazards.

The troops arrived the following night, and the next morning found them all climbing the path which Basil and Marie had taken five days before. They duly reached the little enclosure with its purling stream, and another five-hours' climb brought them to the plain of the cliff and the cleft in the rock.

The tunnel felt and smelt like a tomb as they cautiously made their way along, finger on trigger, and every nerve on the strain to catch the first suspicious sound. The silence and the gloom were things to be felt, intense and overpowering. Dazhinsky would not have the torches lighted—they would only expose the bearers to the marksmen inside, if there were any. And so, with no sound but the shuffling of their feet and the thumping of their own hearts, they crept into the breast of the mountain.

They met with no hindrance of any kind, and at last stumbled into the cavern, and every man heaved a sigh of relief at the wholesome height of roof, which he could not see but which no longer oppressed him with a feeling of premature death and burial.

Then they stood straining ears and eyes into the gloom, and waited expectant. But no sound came—not a breath—not the click of a lock, and Dazhinsky gave the word to light the torches.

The smoky yellow flare dimly illumined the surrounding darkness, and flickered dully back from the threatening walls of rock, and strewed the ground and filled the hollows with weird shifting shadows.

At first the cavern seemed absolutely empty, and then a volley of startled ejaculations of surprise and horror broke from them, as the rude table at the far end glimmered into sight; for at the table sat

a woman—lay over it, rather—with arms outspread and head sunk down between them.

Basil regarded the quiet figure with pity, but with no great surprise. It was, of course, the woman he had seen nursing her husband's dead body that other night. Faithful to death, she had refused to leave it then, and now she had gone to join him, unworthy as he was of so great a devotion.

The men moved towards the table in a body, each one taking courage and comfort with his elbows from the nearness of his neighbour. Bold enough and careless they might be in the open, but there was something creepy, and gruesome, and menacing in this sepulchral quietude, in the chill heavy air, in the solid weight of the darkness that hung like a pall, whose very fringe the sickly torches could not lift.

They gazed compassionately on the woman, for she was dead, and then one held his torch near the dead face and very gently raised it. And a cold spasm of horror ran down Basil Reigne's spine and shook him as though a passing death had run its icy finger over him.

'My—God! what is this?' he gasped.

'*Mon Dieu! mon Dieu! mon Dieu! mon Dieu!*' dropped from Desrolles' white lips as he leaned forward over the table on arms that scarcely bore him for their trembling, his face a distorted smudge of white and black; while Delsarti, after his first wild look of wondering horror, burst forth into a fury of invective so wild and ungovernable that the very soldiers gazed at him in surprise; for the face which glimmered in the torchlight was the sad sweet face of Adela Melita. And she was dead—stabbed between the shoulders as she sat at meat.

'*Mon Dieu! mon Dieu! mon Dieu! mon Dieu!*' dropped ceaselessly from Desrolles' trembling lips, with the repetitive babblement of a mind unhinged,

for his brain had struck ground for the moment on this awful rock of discovery.

And from Delsarti that ceaseless torrent of curses, like the hot outpouring of the lava when the invincible passion below boils over.

The horror and the shock of it for the moment chilled all possibilities of thought as to how she came there, or as to how this terrible thing had come about.

She lay there dead—a marvellously sweet, sad sight; for the sudden horror which must have filled it at the treacherous blow had faded, and left on the fine sweet face—laxed and fallen but very slightly in death, and with one round cheek slightly flattened from its contact with the table—only the shadow of an infinite sadness—the sadness of the past which they all knew so well, mingled now with the sadness of the lost future, which this jealous blow had so ruthlessly snatched away for ever.

'*Mon Dieu! mon Dieu! mon Dieu! mon Dieu!*' from Desrolles.

And from Delsarti that ceaseless flow of curses.

And Basil Reigne stood, tense and pale, his mind beginning to recover from the first numbing shock of it, and to stretch out feeble hands of inquiry as to how this terrible thing had come to pass.

He happened to be nearest to her, and right below him was the ghastly little darker spot between the shoulders where the dagger or stiletto had entered, and whence the much-tried spirit had escaped, and where, as from a spring, the life-blood had welled and made a great, dark, pear-shaped stain on her travelling dress.

The troopers had scattered in twos and threes—no man went single in that cave of death—to rummage and root among the shadows, for the cave was large, and many dark chambers and passages branched off from it. Piled in one corner, they found a great

store of firing, and the sergeant, knowing well the beneficent influence of light and heat, had three great fires built in various parts of the cave, and the spirits of his men responded to the outleap of the flames.

Then, with a shout, the brigands' larder was discovered, and an armful of bottles was brought out, and testified to the excellent taste of the gentlemen of the hills.

Another shout announced a further discovery, and the men clustered round the mouth of an offshoot from the main hall, with exclamations of astonishment.

Dazhinsky and Basil pushed through the crowd, and this is what they found—a long, narrow chamber neatly fitted with wooden pegs driven into the cracks in the wall, and on the pegs hung many suits of clothing. The costumes on the left-hand side were uniforms of the 17th Regiment of Bulgarian Infantry, Dazhinsky's own regiment, complete to the smallest detail—exact duplicates of the uniforms worn by the men who were handling them, and asking one another with excited oaths what it meant. But some of the pegs were empty. On the other wall hung fifty other costumes, and these turned out to be complete uniforms of a Turkish line regiment.

'Well, Monsieur Reigne, what do you make of that?' asked Dazhinsky in a tone of extreme astonishment.

'Hanged if I know!' said Basil, who was beginning to get a glimmering idea of what these things did mean, but had other interests to serve of more importance to him than Dazhinsky's.

And now a yell from the other side of the cavern drew them all that way—all save Desrolles and Delsarti, who had no interest in these matters.

Poking about in a dark recess, one of the soldiers had come upon the body of a man. They carried

it out, and found another and another. It was a veritable charnel-house. Twenty bodies in all were carried out and laid in line on the floor, and silence fell upon the men, for twelve of the bodies were clad in the uniform of their own regiment, but the men were strangers to them, and they had not known them as comrades.

But the very first body brought out, and therefore the very last to have been thrown into the recess, had furnished Reigne with food for abundant thought.

It was that of a tall, dark man dressed in a shooting-suit, and the face was covered with blood.

He bent and examined it, knowing well who it was, while the men were carrying out the rest of their gruesome find, and were still buzzing with excitement over the mystery of the uniforms.

There was a bullet wound in the right temple, and the blood had flowed over the face and clotted into a red mask. And in his own mind Basil reconstructed the tragedy of these two.

The Archduke and Adela, endeavouring to cross the hills, had fallen in with the victorious portion of the brigand band, had been captured, and dragged as prisoners to the cave. Adela, while eating, had been stabbed in the back, most likely by the jealous wife of the Chief, crazed by the loss of her husband. The Archduke, springing up to avenge her, had been shot down by one of the gang.

Treacherous blow! Treacherous shot! and the golden visions of delight which had filled these two lives were quenched in a smother of blood and dust.

He rose with a sigh of profoundest pity, and for a moment there flashed into his mind the thought that perhaps, after all, they were joined in their death, in the fullness of their love, more closely than any earthly union could have joined them.

But his work was still to be done—the special

work for which he had come—and while the rest were examining the bodies of their pseudo-comrades, whom they did not know, and whom they had never seen, Basil edged up towards the recess from which the bodies had come, his nerves strung to their highest pitch.

If the bodies of Alexander and Rudolf Szarvas were brought out, Desrolles and Delsarti, if they should catch sight of them, would be almost certain to recognize, at all events, the former, in spite of his disguisements, unless, indeed, the weight of the blow that had fallen upon them prevented them noticing anything at all. And so he waited, with tightened jaw and clenched hands, ready to create a diversion, in any wild way that might suggest itself, when the critical moment came.

The men came shuffling towards him with another body. It was that of Rudolf Szarvas, in the uniform of a lieutenant of the 17th Regiment, as Reigne had last seen him. He stepped forward, and then back, with a sigh of relief, as he saw that the face, through lying on the ground with the other bodies piled on top of it, was distorted past all knowledge.

The searchers came back and groped all round the recess, but there were no more bodies, and the load went off Reigne's mind. The other, then—Constantine, Chakri, Alexander Szarvas—must have been buried, and the infamous secret was safe.

Dazhinsky gave an exclamation of astonishment as the official uniform caught his eye. He stooped and examined the face carefully.

'I do not know him,' he said. 'He does not belong to us.'

Their ardour for further discoveries was damped. The men gathered round the fires and talked in low tones. They had evidently had enough of it.

Dazhinsky was about to give the order to get back into the open, when Basil's eye fell on the narrow

wooden door behind which Marie had been imprisoned. In pure wantonness of relief from a great anxiety, he strolled up to it and pushed it open, and fell back in amazement.

On the ground sat a woman—the woman whom he had seen that other night, and once before in far-away Vienna—and stretched before her, his head in her lap, was the body of the man she called Constantine. She raised a wan, white face, glanced at them from her hollow eyes, and then bent again over her dead, smoothing the hair and gently stroking the face. And then they stood and silently gazed on her.

Dazhinsky spoke to her in Bulgarian, but she made no sign of having heard him.

'Who is this?' he asked, pointing to the body.

But she stroked the dead man's face and spoke no word.

'You cannot stop here,' he said again. 'We will bury your dead, and carry you down to the plains.'

She smoothed the dead man's hair.

Dazhinsky looked at Reigne, but Reigne only shook his head. The Captain placed his hand on the woman's shoulder. She shook him off angrily.

He signed to four of his men to carry out the body, but she sprang up and stood in front of it, like a she-wolf defending her cubs.

'We cannot leave her here,' said Dazhinsky. 'It is too awful,' and he signed to two more of his men to carry her out.

She bit and struggled, and screamed in a hoarse, choking gurgle. But she was very weak, and the men took her by the arms as gently as they could and forced her towards the tunnel.

As she passed the line of the dead, her eye fell on the body of 'Gospadof.' With a vengeful scream she struggled free, and before the men could stop her she was on it, stabbing, stabbing, stabbing in a dozen places with a stiletto she had plucked from her bosom.

They dragged her off and carried her away, struggling still, but more and more feebly.

As the others turned at the sound of the woman's scream and her sudden attack on the dead, Basil stepped quickly into the smaller cave, gathered a handful of dust from the floor, and hurriedly rubbed it over the face of the dead man. The ghastly feel of it sent another cold shiver down his spine and remained in his memory for many a day. But it was the simplest thing to do. It was done in a moment, and, combined with the changes of death, it altered him beyond all possibility of recognition. The only other thing that suggested itself to him was to set his heel on the calm, dead face, which carried such a terrible secret on it, and that he could not bring himself to do.

'*Tiens!*' he heard Dazhinsky say, even as he rose from his distasteful task and stood looking down on the body. 'Let us see the gentleman who was so carefully guarded,' and he came striding towards the smaller cave.

'Whom have you got there, Monsieur Reigne?'

'That poor woman's husband, I should say.—A Greek from the look of him. Faugh! let us begone —this place sickens me.'

Dazhinsky lighted a sulphur match from his box and stooped to examine the dead man. But the earth-smeared face looked so horribly ghastly that when the match went out he did not light another, but turned with Reigne to join the rest, and gave the word to clear out.

They had all had enough of the place, and with lighted torches they hurried through the tunnel, and thanked God for the sweet air of heaven that greeted them outside.

The woman was lying in a swoon when Basil and Dazhinsky and the rest emerged from the cleft in the rock, and they sat down to consider what had best be

done with her, while the soldiers lay about and drew long breaths, and blew out the taste and smell and feel of the charnel-house.

'We cannot leave her here to go back into that hole of death,' said Dazhinsky.

'What can we do with her?' said Basil. 'If you carry her down to the Château she will come back the first chance she gets. You don't want to make her prisoner, I suppose?'

'*Sacré Dieu!* No! My work here has all been done for me. She is no use to me as prisoner.'

'I see nothing for it, then, but letting her go her own way.'

The sergeant had got some water and bathed the woman's face. Basil gave him his flask, and he poured a few drops into her mouth, and presently an eyelid flickered, and she sighed heavily and sat up, blinking her eyes and twisting her face against the light.

'I want to take you down to some place where you will be taken care of,' said Dazhinsky very gently, for the poor creature looked more feeble and wasted than ever in the sunlight.

'I want nothing,' she said in a hoarse whisper, such a whisper as one could imagine coming from the throat of the dead, 'nothing but my man, and he is dead—dead—dead!' and she rocked to and fro in her grief.

'But you can't live in there, in the dark, alone, with all those dead bodies.'

'There is no one in there but my man, and he is dead,' she moaned, 'dead—dead—dead! and I have nothing left to live for.'

'Ask her who killed him,' said Basil, 'and why.'

The tiger shone out of the woman's eyes at the question.

'It was that traitor,' she hissed, 'that traitor whom I stabbed—his own brother, too.'

'And why?'

'Promise to let me go back to my dead and I will tell you.'

Dazhinsky nodded.

'Promise!' said the woman.

Dazhinsky looked at Basil, and Basil said, 'I fear there is nothing else for it. I don't see how you can keep her, unless you carry her off by force, and that would be useless and brutal.'

'Tell us what you know and you shall go where you choose,' said Dazhinsky.

'It was the night after that night they brought in the woman they had carried off—the first woman. It was all part of a plan. Constantine, my husband, wanted her to marry his brother'—her teeth and her hands clenched tight—'and she would not look at him. So my man had her carried off, and the other was to pretend to rescue her. But he had his own plans to carry out, the traitor, and he shot my man as he sat at meat, and he was the next to die, and then they all fought.'

She turned a glittering, blinking eye on Basil, and said fiercely: 'And you were there, and you called him names, and took away the woman.'

'And what of the other woman whom you stabbed as she sat at meat?' asked Dazhinsky, at Basil's bidding.

'Ay, I stabbed her, I stabbed her,' she said, blinking at him.

'And why? What harm had she done you?'

'She had her man there and she was happy, and my man was dead, and so I killed her.'

She got up feebly and crept away to the cleft in the rocks, and was gone—back to her dead.

Desrolles and Delsarti had come out with the rest, and sat listlessly with their backs against the cliff, careless of all that passed, and wrapped wholly in their own dark thoughts. Neither of them had spoken

a word since, after their first wild outbursts of wrath and grief, they had fallen into a profound and sombre silence.

'My friends,' said Basil, strolling up to where they sat apart, and sitting down alongside them, 'may I suggest that this matter were better not spoken of? For the old lady's sake, and for the sake of the Countess and Princess Marie, all her very dear friends. It would break all their hearts. Do you not agree with me?'

'*Mon Dieu*, yes!' said Desrolles, with a groan.

And 'Yes!' said Delsarti.

'But,' said the little Frenchman, and Reigne noticed for the first time how, suddenly, his face seemed drawn and pinched, 'we cannot leave her there, Monsieur Reigne. We must bury her,' and he sighed heavily, and murmured, '*Mon Dieu! mon Dieu!*'

'Yes, we must bury her,' said Delsarti.

'I will speak to the Captain,' said Basil.

Dazhinsky fell in with their wishes at once. They found, some distance away along the mountain side, a patch of green turf, where, years ago, the crown of the cliff had slid down, and here he set his men to work, with their bayonets and their hands, to scoop out a grave as deep as they could make it.

Desrolles and Delsarti wanted to go in to bring the body out, but Reigne would not hear of it. He took the sergeant and a couple of men, and passed into the tunnel himself.

They came back at last, bearing the limp body wrapped in a man's travelling cloak which they had found there.

They laid her reverently down in the resting-place they had made for her, and stood by with bared heads and heavy hearts, while the men dropped the earth gently over her, and then piled rocks and

boulders above her so that none should trouble her sleep.

Then Dazhinsky gave the word, the men fell silently into line and struck across the valley of rocks.

'What did she mean by saying you called her man names?' he asked, turning to Basil.

'She is mad,' said Basil, and with that Dazhinsky had to rest satisfied.

. . . . . .

It was near midnight when they tramped wearily up the dark avenue between the larches to the Château, all eagerly looking forward to the hospitality and comfortable quarters awaiting them there.

Late as it was, Her Grace of Malplaquet was on the look-out, and as the rest greeted her and passed on into the house, her anxious eye held Basil.

'Well?' she asked when they were alone.

'All is well,' he said gravely.

'*Dieu merci!*'

'And Marie?' he asked.

'She has slept quietly nearly all day. Your mind may be easy about her.'

'Thank God!' he said, and kissed her hand fervently.

They were all keen set and utterly fagged out, and when they had fed, one by one they disappeared, till Basil Reigne and Captain Dazhinsky remained alone.

Basil was determined to find out, if possible, whether Dazhinsky had made any discoveries, or come to any conclusions endangering the matters he so ardently desired to keep hidden. They had spoken little on the way home. The shadow of the charnel-house was over them all. Accordingly he sat and smoked stolidly, and waited for Dazhinsky to break the silence.

'*Eh bien*, Monsieur Reigne!' he said at last. 'What do you make of it all now?'

Basil shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. 'It is a mystery,' he said.

'All the same I see through it. I see just how the whole thing has been worked, and how we have all been hoodwinked. Mighty clever too!'

Basil's raised brows invited him to proceed.

'Don't you see?' he said, with the gusto of a discoverer. 'All those uniforms told the story plain enough. When we chased the brigands we were joined by brigands dressed as Turkish troops, and they helped us to look for themselves. When the Turkish troops chased them they dressed as Bulgarian troops and helped in the chase. No wonder we never came across any brigands. Oh, it was clever! it was mighty clever! However, it is all over now. I suppose there can be no doubt about that fellow being Constantine?'

'His wife said so. That should be enough. God! think of that poor thing all alone in that awful place. It makes one shiver.'

'Yes, it is pleasanter here. Is the Count still away?'

'Yes; he's not got back from Galicia yet, or wherever he went to.'

'I should like to have met him. I am greatly beholden to him for his hospitality. You don't know when he returns?'

Basil eyed him keenly through the smoke, but there seemed to be no hidden point in the question.

'No,' he said; 'we never know when to expect him. He has his finger in a great many pies, and is always travelling about to stir them up.'

'So!' said Dazhinsky. 'I must hope to make his acquaintance the first time I am in Vienna.'

'I am sure he would be delighted to meet you,' said Basil, and involuntarily he rubbed his hand

down his coat, it suddenly felt so deadly clammy. 'I shall be very pleased to introduce you to him the first time you come up—if he happens to be in town.'

'I shall hope to take advantage of your kindness,' said Dazhinsky.

CHAPTER XXXI

TRYING TIMES

DURING these dark and trying days Basil Reigne felt himself like one wandering in a mist in a land of pitfalls.

He had become the repository of a number of terrible and hideous secrets, and while the others, except Countess Anna, knew them in part, he was the only one who was acquainted with the monstrous whole, and he hardly dared to open his lips. For while Desrolles and Delsarti were aware of the death of Adela Melita, and possibly of that of the Archduke, they knew nothing of the Szarvas-Chakri-Constantine infamy, and they must not know. And while the Duchess and Princess Marie were aware of the last they knew nothing of the deaths of the Archduke and Adela, and they must not know, for their burden was already almost too heavy to be borne. And as for Countess Anna, poor soul, when he thought of her he switched his mind away as quickly as he could, for the calamity which had befallen her, and of which she was in completest ignorance, and must be kept so, was monstrous and heartbreaking.

Desrolles and Delsarti, sunk in a gloomy depression which time only could lighten, had been for returning to Vienna at once, but Basil persuaded them to wait a few days in case they could be of any service to their friends at the Château. His own idea had been to give their woe time to struggle out of its first

crushing depths, lest the sight of it in the gay city should cause comment which might lead to inquiry and revelation. On other accounts, as it turned out, it was a good thing for their friends that they remained.

Meanwhile, in the very little talk that passed among them, Reigne never ceased to impress upon them the absolute necessity of keeping the secret they had surprised locked up in their own hearts.

'None but you two and I know of the matter,' he said. 'If ever it leaks out I shall know one or other of you has broken faith, and I shall know what to do.'

They were too utterly broken down even to resent the implication, but they never did disclose what they knew, not even when the whole country was buzzing with wonder at the disappearance of the Archduke.

Many an anxious talk had Basil and the Duchess while Marie was slowly convalescing, though indeed Basil hardly dared to speak, lest unconsciously he should reveal what the Duchess did not know, and very difficult was it to keep up the necessary appearance of unconcern before the Countess, who was daily expecting the return of her husband.

To a nature like Basil Reigne's, even though in training for the diplomatic service, it was difficult in the extreme to be under the necessity of weighing every word before he spoke. For there were certain doors in his brain which he had to keep rigorously closed when speaking to certain persons, and another set which could only be opened when speaking to certain other persons, with the knowledge that the slightest mistake in the openings and shuttings of his brain doors and his mouth might scatter catastrophe broadcast and bring about the direst of calamities.

To Countess Anna the state of matters was utterly inexplicable. The whole house seemed steeped in gloom, though why that should be the result of the successful expedition against the brigands was quite

beyond her comprehension. It was difficult for them to escape the appearance of avoiding her, and yet that was the smallest of the evils which might overwhelm her by the slip of a single word in their intercourse. That their reservations and their sudden silences did not excite her suspicions can only be accounted for by the fact that the actualities were far beyond her wildest imaginings.

But it was a wearing and a trying time for all of them. The finely meshed lines on the Duchess of Malplaquet's face spread and deepened, and many a new one she placed to the account of these last few days at the Château Szarvas. She had nursed the Princess assiduously till her brain was in proper working order. And even then, when almost worn out with the unaccustomed strain, it was in fear and trembling, and only of sheerest necessity, that she gave up her post to the Countess, after counselling Marie to simulate, during her sister's hours on duty, a prostration she did not actually feel. So the Princess took refuge in a disinclination for talk, so unusual with her that the Countess grew to fear that the effects of her strange adventure were likely to permanently affect her brain. She endeavoured more than once to draw from her details of her experiences, and from her sister's absolute refusal to enlighten her she inferred the worst, little knowing how very far beyond her the worst might be.

Take one day's experiences as a specimen of the rest. Basil was an early riser, and had generally put in a half-hour's tramp along the high road before any of the others made their appearance.

As he came into the hall, brisk and fresh from the morning air, the Countess was just descending the stairs.

'How goes the patient this morning, Countess?' he asked.

'She had a good night, Mr. Reigne, but I cannot

succeed in rousing her from her depression. It seems to me to get worse rather than better.'

'She had a great shock. The sooner we all get back to Vienna the better, I should say. When do you think she will be fit to travel?'

'She is almost well again, bodily, but her mind still seems sick. I can hardly get her to speak to me. But we cannot go till the Count returns. I am beginning to feel anxious about him too. Do you think anything can have happened to him?'

'Count Alex could, I should think, take care of himself as well as most men. He was so accustomed to travelling in strange places that I should think you need not feel troubled about him.'

'He has been away now ten days, and he told me he expected to return in six days at the most.'.

'He was going into Galicia again, I think you said?'

'Yes, so he told me.'

'Probably some complications have arisen which detain him.'

'I wish he would come and let us get away.'

'For the Princess's sake, the sooner the better.'

'Still, I would not like Alex to come here and find me away.'

And Reigne's jaw tightened over his knowledge that Count Alex would never return to the waiting wife.

Here the tap-tap of the Duchess's cane told of her coming, and Basil went up the stairs to give her his arm down.

'Ach, my boy, I wish we were all back in Vienna. Anna, my child, our poor Marie will never recover herself till we get away from here. I have just been in seeing her. What say you?'

'But, Duchess, how can I possibly go till Alex returns? He expects to find me here.'

'Ach, so! But if he did not for once it would not

greatly matter. You could leave word explaining what had happened. It is a good thing those other two got safely away before these other troubles came.'

'Yes, that is a satisfaction,' said the Countess. 'When do you suppose we shall hear from them, Mr. Reigne?'

'I can hardly say, Countess,' said Basil, groaning inwardly. 'It may take some time. It would depend on how soon they got across the hills—ah, here come Desrolles and Delsarti. How goes it, my friends?'

'I think you must all have seen ghosts up in the hills,' said the Countess, with an attempt at rallying them. 'The house has been as gloomy as a tomb ever since. Even Monsieur Desrolles and Signor Delsarti are like a couple of mutes.'

'Out of consideration for the Princess,' said Desrolles. 'She was suffering. How is she this morning, Countess?'

'She had a good night, Monsieur Desrolles, but she seems sunk in melancholy, and I cannot rouse her.'

'The shock to her was severe,' said Desrolles. 'No doubt she would recover her spirits more rapidly in Vienna.'

'I believe you have all conspired to get me away to Vienna,' said the Countess, with a laugh. 'Every single one of you has suggested it this morning.'

'No conspiracy, Countess,' said Basil, 'but evidently the obvious truth has struck us all. In the multitude of counsellors there is wisdom, you know.'

'I do not like going till the Count returns, and he may be here any day now, or any hour. I should not be in the least surprised if he came walking in this minute.'

Basil caught a pathetic glint in the eyes of Her Grace of Malplaquet. She tapped away towards the side room where breakfast awaited them, saying—

'Well, children, you can stay and talk. As for me, I am starving.'

Basil strode after her and offered his arm again, for she struck him as looking frailer than usual.

'Basil, my dear boy,' murmured the old lady, 'we must get her away. It is terrible to have her talking so. *Mon Dieu! mon Dieu!* where will it end?' And then she whispered—

'Marie will come down to-day. You must get us all away as quickly as you can, or we shall all go melancholy mad. *Mon Dieu!* I am glad Adela got away before it all. That is my only gleam of consolation.'

He pressed her arm with his own, and she returned the pressure.

'Ah, yes! I have not forgotten you two,' she said, 'but your affair is to come. Adela's joy is by this time consummated, and she is, I pray the good God, as happy as she deserves to be. Don't you feel sure they will be happy, my Basil?' and her upglance bore a new, pathetic look of appeal for something to lean on outside her own strong will—that strong will which had never failed her hitherto, but which had undergone such a terrible shaking of late.

'I am sure they are quite happy,' said Basil, 'for he was a good man, and she was one of the best of women.'

'Was—my dear? Is—surely! They are not dead because they are married, though the story-writers would have us believe the lights fade afterwards. It is so in some cases—in many, perhaps—but it will not be so with those two. Their joys are but beginning.'

And Basil Reigne toyed with the things set before him, but had to confess to a lack of appetite, which had not been a prominent failing with him until the last few days.

'*Mon Dieu!* Reigne, *mon ami*,' said Desrolles over his cigarette afterwards, 'if Count Alex does not turn up soon you must let us go. I really cannot stand it much longer.'

'If the Count does not arrive by to-morrow night I shall insist on the Princess returning to Vienna with the Duchess of Malplaquet,' said Basil. 'I am quite sure she will never recover properly here.'

And then he went away by himself to smoke a strong cigar, where no one could ask him any questions, and where his worried brain could have a moment's rest.

CHAPTER XXXII

WITHIN AN INCH OF DEATH

BUT the hours passed and the Count did not arrive, and, suddenly, all their floating desires and half-formed resolves were crystallized into definite action by the very agency which had brought about all their troubles.

Princess Marie came downstairs later in the day, very pale and quiet, and with a half-scared look still in her great dark eyes, which with her recent illness seemed larger and darker than ever. And after dinner, by way of still further change, Basil induced her to stroll down the path between the larches leaning on his arm.

'O Basil, we must get Anna away. It is frightful. I simply dare not open my mouth to her. Can't we get her away?'

'I told Desrolles this morning that if the Count did not come——'

'*Mon Dieu!*'

'You know what I mean, dearest. They do not know, and I have to assume that he is still alive.'

'It is frightful!'

'It is very trying work and will drive us all crazy if it goes on much longer. Like you, I feel that the only safety is in silence. Even the Duchess is breaking down. If nothing happens by to-morrow night, I shall insist on you and the Duchess going back to Vienna. If necessary, if the Countess will not go, I will stop here for a time with her and bring her as soon as I can.'

They had reached the stone pillars, innocent of gates, through which the approach gave on to the high road to Vilova, and as they stood for a moment, looking along the dusty ribbon winding up into the hills, they caught sight of a woman pacing along it with her back towards them.

Basil recognized the swing of her figure even before she turned, and with an instinct of danger, he said—

'Let us get back,' and they turned towards the house.

But the woman, turning on her beat, had caught sight of them. She gave a hoarse cry like that of a wounded animal, and came bounding towards them.

'Hasten, dearest!' said Basil. 'I will see to her. It is the woman of the cavern. She must not go up to the house.'

Marie hurried on along at such speed as her weakness would permit, while Basil turned to face the crazy woman behind.

To his surprise, however, it was not one pair of feet that came pattering along the road, but many—a dozen at least, he judged.

He cast a quick glance at the Princess, and saw that she would be in safety in a moment, then, with his hands in his pockets, he stepped backwards towards the house with his face towards the high road.

The opening between the stone pillars filled suddenly with a mob of dark figures, and as they

caught sight of him there came a flash and a report, and a bullet flew past him uncomfortably close.

'They 're going to give it us hot,' he said to himself, backing as rapidly as he could, but keeping his face towards them. 'I wonder if Desrolles and Delsarti will have the sense to get out their guns.'

Desrolles and Delsarti had the sense. They were sitting silently over their cigarettes and coffee in the large hall when the shot was fired, and they sprang up at once, just as the Princess dragged herself tremblingly through the doorway.

'What is it?' cried Desrolles.

'The brigands——' panted the Princess, as she sank into a seat. 'Mr. Reigne is out there. I just saw them—coming in—at the gate——'

The two men reached out, each one, for a gun from the rack on the wall, unhooked a bandolier of cartridges, and stepped out on to the verandah, as half a dozen more shots spattered out of the darkness, and some of them came plunging into the woodwork alongside where they stood. Reigne was just backing up the steps.

'That 's right,' he said, as he saw the guns in his friends' hands. 'Hold them off. I 'll join you in a second,' and he went on inside.

'Marie!' he said, as he caught sight of her lying in the chair. 'Get to your room, dearest, and order all the lights to be put out, and all of you lie low till the shooting is over. We 've plenty of guns. I guess we can make it warm for these gentlemen, and we have some old scores to wipe out with them. Run, dearest,' he said, as the guns rang out from the verandah in answer to the 'thud, thud' of the bullets from the other side. 'I am needed out there. Tell Paulo and Fritz to come quick and bring guns.'

He extinguished the lamps in the hall and slipped out quietly to the verandah. The tinkle of glass

from the upper windows followed the next volley from the raiders, but he knew that all the lights would be extinguished in a moment.

Desrolles and Delsarti were lying flat on the verandah, blazing away with their shot-guns through the railing at every venomous spit of fire that flashed out from among the bushes. Their fire, if not deadly, was demoralizing, and the spread of the shot held the enemy in check.

Presently the hall door opened silently in the darkness behind them, and their force was increased by two, as Paulo and Fritz, the two menservants, crept out and lay down alongside the others.

'Are the doors and windows at the back all right?' asked Reigne.

'*Ja*, Herr, I have bolted them all,' said Fritz.

'And all the lights out?'

'*Ja*, Herr.'

'Then all we can do is to wait. Is that a rifle or only shot you have there?'

'Rifle, Herr.'

'Slip in and bring out half a dozen more, Fritz.'

'If I can find them in the dark, Herr,' and he slipped silently away.

No sign or sound came from the bushes in front.

'Shouldn't wonder if they try the back,' said Basil, and even as he spoke there came the sound of a fusillade from the rear of the house and shouts from the inside.

'No—you stop here,' he said, as the others sprang up. 'I'll go. They'll probably try here too.'

He raced through the hall towards the sounds of strife in one of the back rooms. There was a plunging to and fro inside, the trampling of spasmodic feet, and hoarse cries. As he laid hold of the handle the struggling mass inside came against the door with a terrific bump, then rolled off to another part of the room, and he opened the door and slipped in.

The room seemed full of men, heaving and writhing and tumbling to and fro in the dark.

'Where are you, Fritz?' he shouted.

'Fire, Herr, fire!' cried Fritz in gasps. 'I am underneath.'

Basil stood in the doorway and blazed away into the struggling mass. He got in four shots, then clubbed the gun and smote right and left. The fury of battle was in him, and the recollection of his own broken head up on the hillside. They turned on him, and Fritz scrambled to his feet and groped for a weapon, and laid about him also with the first gun he came across, Basil heartening him with his shouts and indicating his own whereabouts at the same time, lest a friendly blow should crack his own skull.

With the two of them on their feet, and four charges of small shot lodged comfortably in their opponents' bodies at short range, the end of the fight was within sight. The floor began to be encumbered with bodies, which responded with groans and curses to the heedless tramplings of the remaining combatants who stumbled about on top of them.

Above the din of his own fight Basil heard firing going on at the front of the house, and full of anxiety as to what might be happening there, he shouted in a fury—

'Down them, Fritz! Down them! We are needed at the front,' and smashed away at every moving thing that offered, getting a knife-thrust through the leg and another through the arm, and exulting in the soft, puddingy reception of his gun butt in the face of the one man, and the groan with which the other collapsed as his knee caught him in the stomach. It was life and death, and more than either for those upstairs, if the fight was lost, and there was no time for nice discrimination. These

fellows had to be got rid of, and so long as the end was attained the method was of no consequence.

The last three of the invaders scrambled headlong through the window from the fury behind. Five lay groaning on the floor. The victors leaned panting against the wall, without breath enough for a single word between them. But the growing turmoil in the front of the house told that business pressed in that direction. With the coming of their first full breath they dragged aside a body that cumbered the door and hurried into the hall.

Here the invaders had met with greater success. They had forced the verandah by weight of numbers, and driven the defenders back into the hall, where a fierce hand-to-hand fight was going badly for the house party.

An occasional shot came spanging in from a group who held the doorway, and by the flashes Basil and Fritz could gather how matters stood. Desrolles stood on the second step of the staircase, holding it for the moment with clubbed gun against three black figures who leaped up and struck wildly at him with their own guns. A few steps above him Delsarti, cursing volubly, was vainly endeavouring to snap cartridges into his gun, which had somehow got jammed. Paulo, the footman, was not to be seen. They found him afterwards on the verandah with a bullet through his head.

Basil and Fritz plucked each a weapon from the nearest rack, the first they could lay hands on, and with a shout dashed into the fray. They fired together on the group in the doorway and two dropped. The third turned tail and fled. Then they fell on the assailants of the staircase and smote them hip and thigh, and felt the skulls of two of them give under the butts of their guns, and the third man Fritz shot as he ran through the doorway.

And so the fight was won, and the victors sank

down on stair or chair or floor, whichever chanced to be nearest, gasping for breath, and just so much better than the vanquished in that they still had breath to gasp for, and by degrees could attain to regular breathing, and so at last to speech.

'Damn them!' panted Basil heartily. 'That was pretty hot work. Are you two hurt? Where 's Paulo?'

'Dead, I think,' said Desrolles; 'he never came in from the verandah.'

'I will go and see,' said Fritz, lurching on to his feet and sitting down again very suddenly. 'Ach! my head is broken. It goes round and——' then he rolled over on the floor.

Basil got up and struck a match and looked for a lamp and lighted it. The feeble glow glimmered on a white face and a pair of dark eyes straining anxiously down over the railing of the gallery, and a voice said—

'Thank God, you are safe, Basil! How is it with the rest of you?'

'We have beaten the ruffians, Marie,' he said, 'but not without loss, I fear. We will count casualties presently. I want some wine. Do you know where it is kept?'

'I will come and get it for you.'

'No, send one of the servants, please.'

'I will get it myself,' she said, and she came down, pale and tense, and stepped round the bodies at the foot of the staircase, and found them wine and glasses in a pantry at the back, and set it before them.

'Anna has collapsed,' she said, 'and the girls are in hysterics, and the Duchess is trying to bring them all round. Is Fritz dead? I thought I heard him talking just now.'

'His head is broken. Let me give him some wine. Now, old man, sit up! You fought like a brick. There, is that better?'

'*Ja*, Herr,' said Fritz, as they propped him up with his head against the wall, and asked sleepily, 'We beat them?'

'All into fiddlestrings. They won't trouble us again.'

'Paulo?' murmured Fritz.

'Ah, I was forgetting Paulo. I will go and look after him,' and he went out on to the verandah, and Desrolles got up and followed him. Those inside heard them strike a couple of matches, and they returned—without Paulo.

'That is our heaviest loss,' said Basil. 'Now, Marie, will you please go upstairs? We have still some work to do—in there,' and he nodded in the direction of the room where his own and Fritz's big fight had taken place.

'Desrolles! Delsarti! Will you give me a hand? No, we will leave the door for a time to let the smoke out, and besides we 'll have to carry them outside,' indicating the dead raiders with his foot. 'No fear of any of them coming back. They 've had a stomachful to-night.'

Wherein he was wrong, and the mistake came within an ace of costing him dearly.

They lit another lamp and went to enter the back room, and Basil turned to glance at his Princess disappearing up the dark staircase.

Then with a startled oath, and a wild leap, he dashed up after her. For with a pad of soft feet, and a flutter of tattered garments, for all the world like the flurry of a wounded bird in a furrow, a dark figure darted through the door and sped up the staircase after the ascending girl, and the lamplight flashed back from the venomous blade in its raised right hand.

In its mad haste the black figure stumbled. Thank God, she stumbled, or he would have been too late! And before she could recover herself Basil had her

by the ankle, and with one great heave flung her, broken, to the foot of the staircase, as one flings away a venomous snake or a loathsome insect.

He knew who it was without looking at her again.

'Thank God, you are safe, dearest!' he panted. 'Now into your room and don't come out again to-night. I think that is the last of it. To-morrow we will go away.'

That was the last of it. With infinite difficulty they succeeded in knocking the murderous knife out of the mad woman's hand, as she lay there striking wildly at anything and everything. They bound her tight with strips of a tablecloth, and gagged her to stop her shrieks. Then they carried out the bodies from the hall and laid them in the verandah, and bolted tight and fast the great hall doors, and then they turned again to their work in the back room. But there was not much to do there after all. Five men lay there. Two of them were dead and the others sorely wounded, and these they bound sufficiently, and left them where they lay.

It was only when the excitement was all over that Basil began to feel the sting and smart of his own wounds.

'Which of you two is best at ambulance work?' he asked, rolling up the leg of his trouser.

'*Sapristi!* You are wounded?' said Desrolles.

'Just a cut in the leg. It 's beginning to smart now. There 's another through my arm. If you 'll help me off with my jacket, Delsarti. So!—gently! —thanks! Now if you 'd get some fresh water I 'd be infinitely obliged to you. We 'll just sponge away some of the blood, it makes such a beastly mess. Now if you 'll make that into a pad, and bind it on as tight as you can, I shall do famously, and I feel like getting to bed. Keep watch? I really don't think it 's necessary. What do you say, Desrolles?'

'I don't think it 's necessary, but we will keep watch all the same, Delsarti and I, turn about. Do you get to bed, *mon ami*. You have saved all our lives to-night and you are wounded.'

'Oh, pshaw!' said Reigne. 'We have all done our duty, and we 've won a big fight. That last bit was the worst of all. It gave me a shake. How goes it now, Fritz, my man? Head still humming? Here'—dipping a big fold of cloth in the water—'let me tie this round it, and you 'll be yourself again in the morning. I wouldn't drink too much of that wine if I were you, while your head 's in that state. Here, take this with you'—mixing a bottle three parts water to one part wine—'and drink as much as you like. It will cool both your throat and your head better than all wine. Now, good-night, everybody! I feel like a whipped dog.' And he climbed the staircase to his own room, and found his legs shaking at thought of what might have happened down there but for the good mercy of God.

But as he passed quietly along the gallery, with the dim light gleaming up from below, another door opened gently, and a soft voice said—

'Basil!'

'Why aren't you in bed, my dearest?'

'You saved my life, Basil.'

'It is so much dearer than my own.'

'May God bless you, my beloved!'

'He has! He does!' and he kissed the pale face and the quivering lips and the dark eyes passionately, and then went softly away, his heart swelling greatly within him with love and gratitude, for the gift and the Giver.

In the morning Fritz was found to be sufficiently recovered to be able to sit a horse, and he was despatched forthwith with a message to the authorities

of Vilova requesting them to send at once and take charge of the brigands, both dead and wounded. Orders were also sent to the keeper of the posting establishment there to send a couple of travelling carriages and a light cart to convey the members of the party and their belongings to Zarnova. The Orient Express did not pass through till eight o'clock on the following morning, but the Duchess was inflexible in her determination to turn the events of the previous night to good account in getting the whole party away from the Château at the first possible moment.

'Anna, my child,' she said, when the Countess still expressed a somewhat half-hearted opinion that her proper place was there till her husband returned, 'I insist on your returning with me to Vienna. This place is no longer safe. If Alex has any fault to find about your running away, let him find it with me. I will take all the responsibility.'

Her voice was grave and not over steady, and her face was whiter even than usual. She seemed shaken, and Countess Anna put it down to the trying events of the last few days—of which she herself knew so very little—and brought her mind to the idea of falling in with the old lady's wishes.

So there was a hurried packing of trunks and boxes. At midday a couple of carts arrived with a dozen soldiers as escort for the transport of the prisoners and the dead, and before nightfall the Duchess and her party were safely lodged in the Grand Hotel at Zarnova.

'What do you suppose brought them down on us in that way, Reigne, *mon ami*?' asked Desrolles, as they sat in the smoking-car, while the train toiled through the long, rolling Servian plains next day. 'And what grudge had that devil of a woman against the Princess?'

'I expect they learned that Dazhinsky and his

men rendezvoused at the Château, and that was their revenge for our leading them to the cavern. As to the woman, the death of her husband had evidently turned her brain. The sooner we forget all about it the better.'

Now that is how Basil Reigne came to marry the Princess Marie Obdanovitch.

. . . . . .

Lord and Lady Watermouth live in the great Castle which stands in the midst of all the old ancestral acres, and a happier and handsomer pair the whole world cannot produce.

The old lord lived long enough to enjoy the apotheosis of the family fortunes, and to dandle two gallant little grandsons on his knee, but not quite long enough to complete the reorganization of the Foreign Office.

Chief among their many visitors is a white-haired old lady, who walks—when she walks—with a silver-handled crutch stick, but prefers not to walk at all. The country people call her 'the Grand Duchess,' and they love her dearly in spite of her tongue, which sometimes does not spare them.

With them lives Lady Watermouth's sister, the Countess Anna Szarvas—sad, pale, and beautiful. She bears the burden of a great sorrow, which her sister and brother dare not attempt to lighten, lest thereby they should increase it tenfold. They do their best to hide the grave of the dead past under the flowers of unchanging love and tenderest affection.

Of the disastrous break-up of her husband's fortunes the Countess knows nothing. Reigne, in a futile attempt at salvage on her behalf, got side-lights not a few on matters which had puzzled him, and confirmation of many grave suspicions. But the hand which had held the complex threads had

gone, and it was quite impossible to unravel the tangle. He learned enough, however, to satisfy him that the Count's fire had been growing cold through simple excess of irons, as the shrewd old lady of Malplaquet had forecast, and desperate need had driven him to desperate expedients. Whence—those various attempts at Reigne's removal when he seemed likely to prove an obstacle in the tortuous way ; the forcible abduction of the Princess ; and that crude plot which was, by hook or by crook, to result in the marriage of Marie to Rudolf, while Reigne was held for ransom in the hills till such time as his interference could no longer avail her. If, by any means, that marriage could have been brought about, Szarvas no doubt hoped to get his hand upon the Princess's revenues as fuel for his fading fires. But that was not to be. He played desperately—lost—and paid.

In due course the Count's nearer creditors seized all he had to salve their wounds. But by that time the Countess was in England with Basil and Marie, and the latter made such dispositions out of her ample purse that her sister has never known that her own fortunes suffered such dire eclipse.

The Countess still clings to the hope that, sooner or later, her husband will return to her, for his death has never been proved, and his body has never been found. His failings, such as she was aware of—and they were many—are forgotten, and she thinks of him as a very different man from what he really was. For the others know that he lies in the corner of a cavern in the Rhodopes, and that another woman's heart broke over him.

And the three ladies of the Castle, when they are together, never cease to spend themselves in wondering conjecture as to what strange fate overtook their dear friend Adela Melita. From the time she

left the Château in the Rhodopes with the Archduke Franz Johann, no word has ever reached them concerning her.

For this also is one of the secrets that have been kept.

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